

Why Women are accepting ISLAM

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

وَاللَّهُ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

**And Allāh guides whom
He wills to the Straight Path**

(Al-Qur'an, An-Nūr, 24:46)

Publishers Note

The Graces of Allāh upon the humankind are numerous. But the greatest one is the Faith of Islam bestowed to humanity.

Those who have been blessed with it are actually the most fortunate persons. If one is awarded with Faith and guided to the Straight Way, it matters little for him whether he has been provided with worldly blessings like wealth, power, dignity etc. or not.

Islam is highly beneficial to humanity both in this life and in the life hereafter. It is a source of goodness and virtues in this world as it guides a man to lead a righteous life, elevates the mind and moral standards, and takes him out from darkness to light. And as regards in the life hereafter, it insures for him the Paradise adorned with the articles of pleasure and delight.

The book under study 'Why Women are accepting Islam' comprises the personal remarks and observations by those lucky women who were blessed with Islam. It has a detailed description as to how they were so impressed with Islam that obliged them to take such a major but uphill decision to abandon the religion of their forefathers. It is evident enough that Islam is the only religion which is so widely accepted by the large number of people each day.

Their opinions about veiling and other moral issues concerning mingling of both sexes freely are worth reading. They are appreciating the place of women and their importance in the Islamic society.

The Compiler of this book, Mr. Muhammad Haneef Shahid is a beloved son of Pakistan, a renowned scholar, author of a number of books. He has a deep love for Islam. He has spent

most of his life in the field of Learning and knowledge. He has dedicated his life to impart knowledge, specially of Islam to a wide range of people. I was introduced to him in 1993 and was greatly impressed with his virtues and qualities.

Darussalam is publishing this compilation with the hope that it will provide to the seekers of Truth, the impressions of those women who have found out the Truth in the form of Islam, and are enjoying its blessings.

Abdul-Malik Mujahid

General Manager

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allah,
the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

Introduction

We Muslims believe in One Allah, One Book, the Noble Qur'an, One Prophet, the Noble Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) One *Qibla* and we are One nation quite distinct from other nations of the world. We feel safe and secure because Allah is with us:

"And indeed We have created man, and we know what his ownself whispers to him. And we are nearer to him than his jugular vein (by Our knowledge)." (*Surat Al-Qaf*, 50:16)

But Allah will only help us and He will be with us when we obey Him. We follow the Islamic Injunctions, Islamic teachings, we follow which is permitted and avoid which is not permissible. In short, we follow the Quranic teachings and the *Sunnah* of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

There is a very famous and important Tradition of the Noble Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in which he gave 'tidings' to us:

"Blessed is he who has seen me, but seven times blessed is he who has not seen me, but believed in me."^[1]

In this respect also we Muslims are very fortunate and lucky. But this depends upon not 'words' but 'deeds'. Unlike Christianity and other religions, Islam is not a religion based on 'dogmas'. This is 'rational' and appeals to the commonsense and reason. This is a 'complete code to life'. We are not expected to sit idle and do nothing. We are expected to do

^[1] (Reference: Abu Umama reported Allah's Prophet as saying: Ahmad transmitted it: *Mishkat-al-Masabih*, translated by J. Robson. Book xxvi, Fitān, page 1385 published by Sh. Muhammad Asraf, Lahore, 1973.)

'righteous' and 'good deeds'. It is then, we can expect rewards and blessings from Allah. From the teachings of the Noble Qur'an it is quite clear that on the Day of Judgement everyone will be shown the record of his good and bad deeds and on that basis he will be rewarded or punished:

"And the book (one's Record) will be placed (in the right hand for a believer in the Oneness of Allah, and in the left hand for a disbeliever in the Oneness of Allah), and you will see the '*Mujrimūn*' (criminals, polytheists, sinners), fearful of that which is (recorded) therein. They will say: 'Woe to us! What sort of Book is this that leaves neither a small thing nor a big thing, but has recorded it with numbers!' And they will find all that they did, placed before them, and your Lord treats no one with injustice." (*Surat Al-Kahf*, 18:49)

And not only this, our sight, heart and other parts of the body will also bear witness on that 'Day':

"And follow not (O man i.e. say not, or do not or witness not) that of which you have no knowledge. Verily, the hearing, and the sight, and the heart, of each of those ones will be questioned (by Allah)." (*Surat Al-Isrā* 17:36)

As Islam is the Religion of Allah. It is a 'God made Religion'. It is not a 'Man-made Religion.' It is rational and appeals to reason and commonsense. Its teachings are very simple and practicable. In short, it is a 'natural religion'. These are some of the main factors that have made Islam the fastest growing religion in the world today.

And this is the decision of Allah that:

"And whosoever takes Allah, His Messenger (ﷺ), and those who have believed, as Protectors, then the party of Allah will be victorious." (*Surat Al-Mā'idah*, 5:56)

It is noteworthy that a lady who is a South African Judge

embraced Islam quite recently. *Yaqeen International* reported that:

"A chief justice of a court in South Africa has embraced Islam. She is a white lady from the African race. Her Muslim name is 'Sara' and she uses this now over her previous name, Toure. She said, she was introduced to Islam by the director of Islamic Cultural Center in Johannesburg."^[1]

There is another report about the spread of Islam prepared by the Kenyan Council of Churches. In her study, Jean Gillaney, a teacher of Christianity, says that the Muslims have doubled their efforts in educating their children and sending them to schools, and that this has enabled them to be more competent in spreading their creed and in calling people to it. She said Muslim children have found their way to schools that are supported and supervised by Christian Missionary Organizations, so as to be educated there. Whereas Christian children are excused from joining Muslim schools, something which the Christian organizations ought to take seriously into account.

Ms. Gillaney admits in her study that efforts by Missionaries to spread Christianity... in predominantly Muslim areas have failed.^[2]

There is another good report regarding the U.S. TV, showing Islamic programs. According to IINA, an Islamic Television station, based in New York, allocated 30 hours per week of its broadcast to Islamic Cultural programs. The Islamic programs are part of Muslim Americans effort to spread the message of Islam and to familiarize the American public about its universality and forgiving nature.

^[1] *Yaqeen International*, August 7, 1998, page 56)

^[2] *Dawah Highlights*, October 1998, Vol. ix, no. x, page 57)

The Islamic programs can be seen in several American states which is of great benefit to the growing Muslim population in the country.^[1]

Another news which is of great importance is that the UN has declared *Eids* as official holidays. According to the report the United Nations, overcoming strong oppositions from Western nations and Russia, has decided to declare the two Islamic holidays - the '*Eid-ul-Fitr*' and '*Eid-ul-Azha*' — as official UN holidays.^[2]

In this respect, Dr. Abdullah Salen Al-Obeid, Secretary General of the Muslim World League, thanked the Saudi delegation to the UN for its efforts which culminated in the adoption by the UN General Assembly of a draft resolution approving the '*Eid-ul-Fitr*' and '*Eid-ul-Azha*' as official holidays at the UN Headquarters and its affiliated working centers worldwide.^[3]

As regards this book, this is the third part in the same series: "Why Islam is our only choice?" But I must make it quite clear that this book is totally different from the previous two parts already published from Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by Darussalam Publications and Dar-ul-Hadyan one after the other in 1996 and 1997. This book in question deals with the 'Females' only whereas the previous parts comprise of 'Males' and 'Females' both. These are the 'Personalities' which are new and not included in any book published already.

I have tried to give references at the end or in the beginning of each article. I have also given introductory notes where found necessary.

As regards the 'Captions' or 'Titles' of each article, I may point

^[1] *Riyadh Daily*, Friday, June 26, 1998, page 8)

^[2] *Dawah Highlights*, May 1998, Vol. ix, No. 5, page 58

^[3] *Saudi Gazette*, Friday, 6 June, 19998, page 9

out that after going through the subject matter, i.e. the article or reversion story, I have selected the 'Caption' or 'Title' and given on the top of the article. I have not touched some of the 'Captions' or 'Headings', on the contrary, I have left them intact.

I think, to some extent, I have done my duty in this respect and the result and reward, if any, is in the Hands of Allah, the Almighty. And this is the best award and reward that He has bestowed upon me; health, strength, patience and perseverance, as a result of which I have been able to complete this volume. In short, Allah guided me, and I, with quite humbleness, bow my head to Him:

"As for those who strive hard in Us (Our Cause), We will surely guide them to Our paths (i.e. Allah's religion — Islamic Monotheism). And verily, Allah is with the *Muhsinin* (good doers)." (*Surat Al-Ankabut*, 29:69)

As far as our duty is concerned, we, being very humble servants of Islam, try to preach and spread the 'Message of Islam' by writing books and articles, etc., and leave the result to Allah.

"And our duty is only to convey plainly (the Message)." (*Surat Ya-sin*, 36:17)

Our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has, in one of his Traditions stressed and enjoined upon the Muslim *Ummah* to:

"Propagate my teachings even if you know only one Verse."

And in another Tradition the Holy Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has given glad tidings that:

"The best amongst you is he who learns Qur'an and teaches it to others." (*Al-Bukhari*)

And yet in another Tradition he has clarified that:

"The superiority of a learned man (in religion) over a (mere) worshipper is like the superiority of the moon

when it is full over all the stars." (*Al-Bukhari*)^[1]

At the end I would like to thank brother Islam Shaban Dadusha for his precious and priceless advice with regard to this book. May Allah bless him! *Ameen!* May Allah accept our humble efforts!

Servant of Islam

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K.S.A.

15th Zul-Hajj, 1419

(1st April, 1999)

^[1] Reference: *Meaning and Significance of Dawahtul-Allah: A Guide to the Propagation of Islam*, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, 1985, pages 2,3,5.

O MUSLIM WOMEN^[1]

"O Muslim Women!

Out of the evening create a dazzling morn
to the true lovers of God.

Recite the Holy Qur'an

And enthusiastically translate its spirit into action.

Don't you know that the pathos of your recitation
Changed altogether Umar's fate."^[2]

Allama Iqbal

^[1] *Armughan-e-Hijaz*, by Allama Dr. Muhammad Iqbal (Persian) page 94.

^[2] Reference is made to 'Umar bin 'Al-Khatib's conversion to Islam in Dhul-Hijjah, the Sixth Year of Prophethood. For details see *Ar-Raheeq Al-Makhtum* (The Sealed Nectar) by Safi-ur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, pages, 109-114.

Why Islam is my only Choice

The following is the 'Journey to Islam' story of sister Aisha Cassana Maddox Nablisi of U.S.A. It so happened that sister Aisha wrote a letter to S. Arif Mahmood Bokhari regarding an inquiry of the Global Arabic Encyclopaedia. After doing the needful, brother Bokhari handed over the letter of sister Aisha to me with the idea that I may contact her as she had embraced Islam. So, I did not miss the opportunity and wrote a letter to sister Aisha on 8th February, 1999. I also sent her a questionnaire. I am really grateful to sister Aisha who not only answered all the questions but also supplied me the address of sister. Ms. Khadijah Odet, another young former American Christian who came to Islam. She has recently taken her Master's Degree and has spent some time in Amman, Jordan where sister Aisha used to visit her frequently.

Sister Aisha is fortunate that she came to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1977 and attended Shariah College. She also studied Arabic earlier, stopping in Jeddah, where she was hosted by Dr. Fatma Nassief, the sister of Dr. Abdullah Umar Nassief who was the Vice-Chancellor of King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah. She also visited the family of Muhammad Khalil Enani. His daughter and sister Aisha were exchange students; sister Aisha from the United States to Saudi Arabia and she (daughter of Mr. Enani) to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

After a year in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, sister Aisha was fortunate to have had the privilege of performing the *Hajj*. Then she returned to her family and entered Teachers College, Columbia University.

Sister Aisha is overwhelmed by the beauty and charm of the Arabic language, particularly the language of the Holy Qur'an.

the Word of Allah. So much so she purchased the Global Arabic Encyclopaedia so that she may clear her total Arabic lessons and review her knowledge of reading the Arabic language, she endeavored to formerly study at University in the United States and at the Shariah College in Makkah Al-Mukarramah.

She calls Arabic language as the 'language of faith'. She was able to do after having studied Arabic earlier in the U.S.A. 7 years at University, with privately engaged tutors, enhanced by electronic tapes.

She had previously studied Italian, French and was studying Russian during the early 1970s, when she suddenly had a profound thought. "If you truly believe in the 'Divine Faith', which is Islam. Why are you studying Russian when you should be studying Arabic". She immediately went up to the good Russian teacher and told her, I must withdraw from the class and transfer my required study of a 'foreign language to the Arabic Language.'

Later on she found Mrs. Attyat El Saudi teaching Arabic at a newly founded college, Essex County College, in New York, New Jersey which has since become a University. For the sake of learning Arabic, sister Aisha had to travel 3 times a week, before reporting to a television station where she was simultaneously employed during those years.

Now I feel much pleasure in presenting sister Aisha's thought-provoking and heart-rending 'conversion story' to you, my esteemed readers!

My Dear sibling in Islam

Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatu.

Thank you for your kind invitation to include me in your research on *Why Islam is Our Only Choice?*

Please be well advised that I am heartfelt that Muslims there in the holy land are reaching out to communicate with us, the

diaspora in Islam.

Frankly speaking, I am amazed at some of your questions of inquiry, i.e. no man in the western world, would dare ask a western woman of her date of birth!!

On that issue, I double dare any of my 2, ex-husbands to ask that question. It will have to suffice to say, I am over 40.

My formal education, goes slightly beyond the norm, in the normal sense, I earned after high school a bachelor's degree in International Studies with 2 of the 7 years I studied Arabic, as my required foreign language course. I also studied Arabic with privately paid tutors, courses at the Sussex County College in New York, New Jersey while I was a resident of New York where I was born, reared and educated. I have been in the past however, also a member of the United States Navy and availed myself of the opportunity of studying Arabic: Saudi Language Dialect, from the electronic study material available from them, which I own and yet periodically use, in order to maintain some facility with the language. I am a graduate of naval schools, as well as a civilian. I was and remain grateful to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who permitted me to come to the Kingdom and attend Sharia College in 1977, where I also studied Arabic earlier stopping in Jeddah, where I was hosted by Doctor Fatma Nassief, the sister of the much revered Abdullh Nassief who was at the time head of King Abdul Alziz University, Jeddah as well as the family of the Rabitat of Jeddah: Mohammad Kahlil Enani. His daughter and I were exchange students; me from the United States to Saudi Arabia, she, to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. After a year in the kingdom, after I was so fortunate as to have had the privilege of performing the *Hajj*, I returned home, to my family and entered Teachers College, Columbia University, New York where I earned a Master's degree in International Education Development with a minor in the Teaching of English, as a

second language.

My attending mosque in New York, was at the Islamic Cultural of New York, earlier at West 72nd St., New York, which was sponsored by 7 Arab country members of the United Nations: For many years the *Imam* was Dr. Hosni Gabner from Egypt, and the permanent Secretary at the time: who is now head of public relations; Mr. Younis Muhammad from Algeria. The mosque has now relocated to East 93rd Street and 3rd Avenue in New York, and I have semi-retired to these hills and desert of Southern California.

I came to Islam, as it is *Sunni* practiced, taking the *Shahadah* in Northern Nigeria where I was visiting in-laws of my second marriage to a diplomat from Northern Nigeria. The Fulani-Hausa people were a fascinating lot, who seemed to know of my people in the United States, although I knew little of them. They seemed to have correctly sensed that I was seeking elements of the past of my people, who had ancestrally been taken out of Africa, and they introduced me to Islam, and informed me that it was the most important facet of the historical past, of the people who had been taken out of Africa and brought to America in slavery. This was during the mid-1969's I was not entirely ignorant of the Holy Qur'an as I had years earlier read the English translation by Allama Abdullah Yusuf Ali of the 'divine message' delivered to the *Rasool* (peace and blessing be forever upon him and his kin.) A feat which I continuously enact. I never tire of reading Kor'an which has been sent to us, for righteous guidance.

Please permit me a moment to dwell on that linguistic term righteous guidance. It is a terminology, which were it embraced after kind exploration from those who come from the east, and deign to teach the Divine Message delivered to the Prophet Muhammad, (may the peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), would make it ever so much easier for people here to

understand. We, here are not all immigrants, as many post-ww II, new comers would have the world believe. The United States, is 300 years old. There are an American People, some are descendants of settlers as the Governor of New Jersey recently emphatically explained her ancestors were and some are descendants of the great atlantic slave trade; those taken from the mouth of the Gambia and the Niger were the descendants of the Islamic people taken out of Africa. The more celebrated slaves here in this country are those who are West Indian, immigrants to the United States who descend from the Africans taken out of the hub of Sub-Saharan Africa to those south-western shores. They have further immigrated here, many have accepted Islam and from the greater number of those who comprise the people known as members of the Nation of Islam. Here in this country, on the east coast, we have all undergone much integration through inter-marriage.

Some credit must be given herewith by me, to the honorable Elijah Poole Muhammad, to whom the message of the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), through the Islamic *Mubashir* (Muslim missionary,) the honorable, Mr. Fahad Muhammad obviously sent during the reign of King Faisal Al-Saud.

It is no wonder that Mr. Fahad Muhammad was jailed in the mid-western jail for attempting to teach Islam here, especially if he presented such ideas to white Americans. Christian society does not much tolerate what it calls foreign ideas, especially in the late 1920's. Islam, although in an incorrect form presented to people whom he organized, was only able to take hold in this country, by his efforts, to be further studied and clarified by people like myself, who sought clarification and truth.

Much of my privately owned material I have purchased much material from New York, London as well as even

Higgenbothoms Book Store on Mount Road, in Madras.

I have also had the privilege and honor to have visited in the past, in Indonesia, South India and my late, ex-husband was once his Governments representative to Pakistan from which I returned to the West, the weather, without air conditioning was just too much for me.

It is suffice to state, that I was never a believer in a faith before Islam, although I believed a clear clarified Divine Message existed somewhere out there and I believe I found it, in Islam: a religion which did not command me to worship a figure of man, as a God. To seek the will of God, is man's most basic instinct. To do the will of the Almighty and yet not do the Will of Allah, is man's most common failing especially here in my country, where in fact, the \$ dollar is really worship.

Christianity is known by the 'works' of the people, who declare themselves as such, and have fallen short. The behavior of Christians has fallen so low, as revealed by The Jerry Springer television show, which on video is marketed world-wide, as well as by the behavior of the President. The physical plane of the nation is wracked by natural disasters because, Allah is not pleased.

I am quite pleased to communicate with an intellectual of a people, with whom I have enjoyed some association as colleagues. I have the honor to have known many people from Hindustan who are Muslim as well as Hindu. As I am currently writing a manuscript as to my views on Islam, 'The Divine Message' as delivered to the Rasool: (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), Arabia and Contemporary Arabs, the modern evolution of Saudi Arabian culture as I viewed it (I also taught English at Umm Al-Qur'ah). My husband and I returned there to lecture in 1982-1983. From there we went our separate ways I returning to my family in New York, teaching at The University, of the City of New York. I

have also lectured at Al Fateh University in Tripoli as well as Garyounis University in Benghazi. I now embark on writing English language readers for grades 6 - 12, material which is targeted for those who are interested in English readers of the American language, for morally sensitive clients.

My basic book written for my people here in America, is titled: *The World, Which was the World of the Black Man, and What Happened to It.*

It takes a broader view than, that promoted of being merely of Africa and covers the beginnings of Mongol invasions upon northern China, the invasion of the Aryans upon Hindustan and the effects of the caste system upon the conquered. It bespeaks of the Sutras of Varna as being the Roots of Racism, a subject which is major pre-occupation here in this country of white as well as black society. It brings to the attention of my people, here in the west of the Romans, who are commonly known in Europe as not having been initially 'white' but having come from India. And most important, of how they and people who come into a land and society, transport ideas. It documents important historical ideas related to the Syrian-berber conquest of Spain and the previously little known battle which arose in North Africa of which the fighting down into Mali, destroyed the University of Timbuktu. And it documents the fact that the officials of the University, deployed a large mass of documents from this Islamic University overland, by the Tauregs and that it remains there till this day. Within the Great Mosque of Kano, Kano, is a more than 900 year city in Northern Nigeria. I have also spent a great deal of time there.

I have 3 sons, 2 of whom I live with.

Aisha Cassana Maddoz Nablisi (U.S.A)



From edge of despair to glory in Islam

We feel pleasure in presenting a heart-rending and soul provoking conversion to Islam story of Sister Aesha Lorenz Al-Saeed with the hope that 'Seeker of Truth' may benefit from it and adopt the 'Right Path'. In *Sha Allah!* During her study in an Episcopal private school, she studied world religions. 'Trinity' was a point of contention for her like many others, because it was not logical and did not appeal to reason. She met some Muslim from Middle East in her High School days. Someone suggested her to read about Islam. Her grandfather too encouraged her by saying that Islam contained a 'good moral code of living.'

"The more she read, the more she found answers to all her questions, with the result her discoveries enlightened her. We are quite sure that Allah guided her to the 'Right Path' and she was enlightened by the Truth of Islamic teachings by her study and without any compulsion. In the Holy Qur'an Allah declares:

'There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path' has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in *Taghut* and believes in Allah, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is All-Hearer, All knower.'

Allah is the *Wali* (Protector or Guardian) of those who believe. He brings them out from darkness into light. But as for those who disbelieve, their '*Auliya* (supporters and helpers) are *Taghut* (false deities and false leaders,) they bring them out from light into darkness. Those are the dwellers of the Fire, and they will abide therein

forever."^[1]

Islam was clear, logical with explanation and guidance for every aspect of worship and human relations. It is to be noted that at the age of 17, she began to pray regularly and fast. She was indeed a Muslim by heart and through study, she believed in Allah works on His own timetable and everything has a plan if it is good for us. She declared *Shahadah*. Later on she married a Saudi Gentleman. She is content and satisfied and greatly thankful to Allah because all her wishes have been fulfilled — Editor.^[2]

One day when I was six years old, my parents gave me a shiny quarter, as they did every Sunday morning and told me to put it in the collection plate for church "to give it to Jesus for his work."

When I returned, however, the quarter was still in my purse. I was frank in explaining that I hadn't given my money for Jesus because he was absent.

My parents were more amused than concerned, probably thinking that my genes would prevail, having descended from a family with three Christian ministers as my grandparents.

I attended an Episcopal Private School where we studied world religions during my last year of elementary school. I was intrigued with my father's Swedenborgian faith for a time, as it injected an element of mysticism into his essays on faith, however, the trinity was a point of contention for me as I felt it wasn't logical. How could one father (The Great Spirit), plus

[1] *Interpretation of the Meanings of 'The Noble Qur'an* by Dr. Muhammad Taqi Uddin Al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Riyadh, Maktaba Darussalam, 1993. (Surat al-Baqarah, 2:256-257, pages 66-67)

[2] *Saudi Gazette*, Friday, 13th April, 2001, page 9.

what was called 'His Son' (Jesus), and one Holy Ghost (who I now understand to be Angel Gabriel) all be together as one, inside one being?

It was logically impossible, and I had been raised to use rational thought to make decisions in my life, I knew I couldn't accept the creed of three equaling one.

I continued reading the Bible every Sunday with my father after dinner, looking for answers and enjoying stories of historical Prophets, at the same time not feeling totally satisfied. I was told I should not question, but simply believe in good faith. However, I never was one for blind following, and I needed to feel the proof on my own.

In High School, I met some students from the Middle East who were Muslims. Noticing my inner dissatisfaction, one asked if I had ever read about Islam, and suggested that I make use of our school library to discover more information about it. I was elated to discover that there was even a copy of the Qur'an which I checked out to borrow.

When I brought some books home, my grandfather encouraged me to learn, and reassured my family that Islam contained a good moral code of living.

He himself had immigrated to America in 1913 when he was a boy from a Russian province next to Turkey on the Black Sea, and remembered hearing the call to prayer, and that some of our relatives had Arabic Muslim names, such as Maryam and Sophia.

The more I read, the more my understanding and excitement grew. I found the answers to all my question, and more! Everyday I looked forward to reading more, and my discoveries enlightened me. Islam was clear, logical, with explanations and guidance for every aspect of worship and human relations.

At the age of 17, I began regular *Salat* (prayer) and completed

my first Ramadan fast. If I went to the park, or out with friends, I would stash a bag of dates (if I had them), a bottle of water, and maybe a sandwich or can of food, and break my fast wherever I was at that moment. My non-Muslim friends would good naturedly remind me of the sun's setting so I could break my fast.

That summer I took the train for 2 days to Bloomington, Indiana to attend the Muslim Students Association's lectures and seminars to learn more about my new faith.

I stayed on campus with other Muslims for a week, and my faith blossomed. I returned home with a prayer rug, prayer beads, books, and several scarves, although unfortunately I did not have the courage to continue wearing the scarves once I left.

I attended Portland State University with a major in teaching English as second language, and a minor in Middle Eastern studies. I hoped to go to Saudi Arabia to work, visit Makkah and Madinah and perform *Hajj*.

In my last year of study, I began to push myself too hard, too fast. I began to doubt I would realize my goals, and became depressed. Trying to compete with my friends in graduating early, I did myself a disservice by overloading myself with extra classes which resulted in my having a nervous breakdown.

As I stood one evening overlooking beautiful lights of the city from a high rise building, I thought how easy it would be to just step off into the air and end it all.

However, suicide in Islam was a big sin (I didn't know that at the time), but I knew how it would deeply hurt my close relatives and friends if I 'took the easy way out.' Besides, I reasoned with myself, there's still that tiny chance that Merciful Allah might let me get to Makkah after all, so why not wait to find out?

Indeed, Allah works on His own timetable and everything has a plan if it is good for us.

Advised to make a fresh start, I moved to Houston, Texas to seek employment, instead of study. I thought if I could start out on my own in a strange city, I could certainly later get the courage to go to the Middle east. I hoped that my three years of Arabic studies would help me find a job in ARAMCO or one of the other major companies in Texas.

After arriving in Houston now wearing *Hijab*, I searched for the mosque in the telephone directory and asked there if I could find a Muslim girl to be my roommate. Allah was generous, and one welcomed me into the community as a sister. I soon after found work and my confidence grew.

One evening at an International costume party I met a polite gentleman whom I later found to be an intelligent Saudi student. We married shortly thereafter, and through him God has let my dreams come true. We have three lovely children, and he has taken me on *Hajj*.

I am content and satisfied and greatly thankful to the Almighty God, who certainly answers earnest *Dua'a* (supplications). If it is good for us. If we are patient, and have *Iman* (faith), Allah does help us even in ways we don't expect.

Aesha Lorenz Al-Saeed



African Missionary finds Truth in Islam despite unbearable hardships

The nuns looked so clean and smart in their starched white habits. They looked like the saints in the pictures that hung on the wall of every classroom, that I dreamt of the day I could be like them.

I was among two other girls who get excellent grades at the end of the school year and we were asked if we would like to study religion. They thought we were pious for our ages because we liked to spend endless hours inside the church. They didn't realize that the inside of the church was dim and cold and a welcome relief from the hot African sun.

I couldn't wait to tell my father, who surprisingly said, 'absolutely not!' He would not like that kind of life for one of his girls; without husband and children. He enrolled me in another school, which had previously only admitted boys.

Besides myself, there was another girl in the Roman Catholic Mission school in Burundi.

The years I spent at this school made me quite tough as I competed only against boys. The nuns used excessive force in disciplinary matters. The fact that we were all adolescents might have had a good deal to do with it. Still, it didn't seem a very Christian thing to do.

I was interested in religion and excelled in the study of languages and accepted a full scholarship to a university in Cameroon after graduating from high school. Again, as the only female, I enrolled in the College of Theology. I wasn't sure where I would go with it, but after a short while, the administration applied for a scholarship in the same College of Theology, but in Belgium. There I would learn how to be a

Pastor in the Roman Catholic Church.

My language ability aided me quite a bit and my mastery of some of the African dialects attracted them as a good candidate for missionary work.

As the years went by, I began to see through the layers of theology and found the superficiality of their teachings. I was not alone in seeing the many contradictions in the New and Old Testaments. To learn that the 'Trinity' is mentioned only once in the New Testament was a surprise but when I learned it had been fully established at the Council of Nicea and that it was not part of what Jesus taught, something in my mind clicked.

We were shown certain books called the Gnostic Books, which we were told were hidden teachings. I understood that the church was being deceitful and this was disturbing. How could I believe that this was, as they said, the Word of God from A to Z:

The people of the Book know this as they know their own sons; but some of them conceal the Truth which they themselves know. The Truth is from your Lord, so be not in doubt. (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2: 146-147)

Still I pursued my studies in an effort to be able to help myself and my people some day:

As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou has no part in them in the least: their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did. (*Surat Al-An'am* 6:159)

After graduation from University, I took a position in Nairobi, Kenya. The Church was very anxious to have an African in a position such as this. They had many programs for women and I was a coordinator for these programs under the auspices of the World Council of Churches. I handled different aspects of exhibitions, women's projects, donors, workshops and

conferences.

I was sent to the regional office in Togo because they are mainly French-speaking which I spoke fluently and the type of projects I knew how to handle were being implemented there. I began to search for the spiritual force that was missing in my life and in Togo I searched through all the practiced religions. When one looks for truth there are many things thrown in one's path.

This part of Africa has many people who practice witchcraft and who claim to have knowledge of the unseen and it was obvious they were just taking people's money. There is no one with knowledge of the unseen except God.

I had been facing much mediocrity from the Church and at the same time I had Muslim friends who were very comfortable in their knowledge of God, who prayed five times daily and who had many virtues. They believed in what they said, in contrast to the Church, where you repeat what you have been taught without believing in it.

I had never been taught any thing about Islam except a superficial introduction so I did a lot of reading about the religion.

I cannot say that to convert to Islam was easy; it was very difficult. But when one is searching for the truth there is no way to deny it.

The decision was also difficult for economic reasons as I had one of the highest paying professions with many perks.

I resigned from my position citing my conversion as my reason and immediately lost my job and salary, housing and medical benefits. I became destitute in one day!

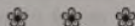
My family does not like my *Hijab* but they admire the moral aspects of Islam.

I helped to raise my brothers and sisters and they are much younger than I, and now to see how much they hate me is almost unbearable.

They felt the economic hardship immediately as I did, and cannot understand why I would do such a thing. But with the grace of Allah they too will find the truth of Islam. *In Sha' Allah.*

I hope and pray that I can use the knowledge that the education in the church gave me towards the propagation of Islam. The spiritual climate of West Africa is ripe for Islam and there are many projects which need doing. This is what I have been trained to do and so my path is straight and narrow for me now.^[1]

An African Missionary



Islam has done me a world of good

I was born a Buddhist but I was not taught anything about Buddhism, its teachings or its principles. All that I knew about Buddhism was following my parents to the temples during festive seasons (which is on a birthday, nearly every month, of one god or another) or praying at home to the god of Heaven, the god of the lounge, the god of the kitchen and so on.

We used joss sticks to pray to those idols, or even colored metal plates with inscriptions on them. When we prayed, we prayed only for our own good, making up a very long 'Shopping list'. In our worship we did not think of anybody except ourselves

^[1] *Islamic Voice*, February 1997, page 18

and our immediate family.

In Malaysia, the Chinese think that they are superior. Most Chinese are either Buddhists or Christians and there is only a very small minority who are Muslims. These Chinese Muslims are looked down upon. All the Malays are Muslims and the Chinese consider them stupid and lazy. Therefore to associate with any Malays was a terrible 'sin'.

To the older generation of Chinese and their ignorant way of thinking, Islam is only for the Malays, and since all the Malays are Muslims, Islam is a stupid religion. This is because to the non-Muslim Chinese the Muslims seem, when praying with their faces turned towards *Qibla*, to be praying to the wall, while they, the Buddhists pray to idols which, to them, is more realistic. Secondly, the Muslim fast is considered stupid as the Chinese enjoy their food. Thirdly, Muslims do not eat pork while the Chinese love it. And the sin of all sins-Muslims can marry four wives whereas the Chinese would not admit that they have a few mistresses, although keeping up the appearance of only one official wife.

Because I was brought up in such a society, I also accepted their ignorant way of thought. Moreover, because of the racial tension in my country, I did not trust any Malays and so my knowledge of Islam was practically nil.

I was never a religious person at home so when I came to England I became an atheist. All my friends were not religious either. All we were interested in was amusement and entertainment, like parties, discos, going out with men, etc. I was, if you would like to term it, a very bad girl.

It was after two years in England and one broken marriage, that I met a Muslim Malay. He gave me a few books on Islam and in order to please him I read them. I was very suspicious of Islam but I was willing to learn and soon my interest grew.

He then took me to the Mosque at Malaysia Hall and introduced me to someone who then introduced me to the Ladies Islamic Circle where I could learn more about Islam.

I did not have much opportunity to go to the Circle in the beginning because of my work. However, my fiancé was always there to answer my questions when I was in doubt.

Then one day I came across a copy of the book *Islam Our Choice* I read this book carefully and the feeling that those brothers and sister of Islam expressed in that book made a great impression on me. I realized then that Islam would be the right path for me to follow.

Another thing that made me to embrace Islam was the close unity I felt towards the Muslims I met. I have never felt or seen such close brotherhood.

The five pillars of Islam, when I analyzed them, made more sense to me than worshipping the idols:

1. Belief in One God and that Muhammad is His Prophet and the last of the Prophets made more sense than praying to Buddha (who was a man) and to idols made by man.
2. Prayer reminds one of God and Prevents one committing sins. Also praying towards Makkah brings about a central focus for all Muslims of all races and notions.
3. Fasting develops one's will-power, and self-control. At the same time, it reminds one of the poor and needy and starving people.
4. Zakat ensures that the materialistic urge within us does not overpower our tendency to share with others.
5. Hajj during which we visit Makkah once in a lifetime is a gathering of Muslims of all colors and races.

What really impressed me most about Islam was its moral teachings: that one must dress decently and cover up one's body especially in the case of women. This is to prevent any destructive or unbefitting trends or desires to prevail in the society.

Another aspect of Islam that attracted me was cleanliness which in Islam is very important. Cleaning after answering the call of nature, and taking *Wadhu* before going for prayer sounded natural to me and very wise.

Against my parent's wishes, I became a Muslim after six months of studying the religion. I hope one day my parents will come to understand that Islam has done me a world of good, much more than even what they had taught me for eighteen years.

I became a Muslim because I believe in Allah as the only God and that Muhammad is his Prophet, and because I accept the teachings of Islam as they are laid down in the Glorious Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet.

I intend, *In Sha' Allah*, to be a good and true *Muslimah* and I would like to thank all the brothers and sisters who have helped me, in one way or another, to discover and embrace Islam.^[1]

Aisha Ong



^[1] Courtesy: *The Muslim* (London), October-November, 1974, Vol.12, No.1, pages 10-11

Everybody desires world peace, well, there is nothing which will better accomplish that than the festival at the end of the Pilgrimage at Arafat!!!

Miss Irene Jane Wentworth Fitzwilliam, 10th Earl cr 1716; William Thomas George Wentworth. Fitzwilliam, TD; JP; DL; Baron Fitzwilliam, 1620; Earl Fitzwilliam and Viscount Milton. 1716 (Irish honours). Baron Milton (Great Britain). 1742: was born on 28th May, 1904; and was son of Late George Charles Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, son of 5th Earl) and Evelyn, who died on 21st September, 1979.^[1]

Miss Irene Jane Wentworth Fitzwilliam went to Egypt to make a study of comparative religions, and was so much impressed by the Truth of Islam that she became a Muslim in 1931, and took the name of 'Aisha, which means 'The Enlightened', after the name of the beloved wife of the Noble Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings be upon him).^[2]

It is notable that her Sister Miss E. Wentworth Fitzwilliam, daughter of the Hon Henry wentworth-Fitzwilliam, the second son to the 6th Rail Fitzwilliam while her mother was lady Mary Butler, daughter of the Marquis Ormonde of Kilkenny Castle in Ireland. Miss E. Wentworth-Fitzwilliam entered the fold of Islam following the example of her elder sister.^[3]

Al-Hajja A'isha Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, grand daughter of

^[1] *Who was Who*; 1971-1980, vol. VII. London, Adam and Charles Black, 1981, page 79

^[2] *New Castle Journal*, December 8, 1937 with reference to *Islamic Review*, July 1938, Vol. 26, No. 7 page 278.

^[3] *The Islamic Review*, September 1938, Vol. 26, No. 9320.

the late Earl Fitzwilliam, performed *Hajj* in 1935. While paying rich tributes to the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings be upon him) and giving her impressions about the pilgrimage, she said:

"I am going more particularly to address the non-Muslims who are not as well acquainted with the noble Character and life of the Holy Prophet as are many other here.

The Prophet Muhammad's character and qualities were those which appeal especially to my own countrymen and women - namely, courage, loyalty, kindness and the greatest generosity to a fallen foe. His courage was exceptional. At the commencement of his great work, he stood entirely alone, his clansmen and even his family were against him, and he fought for his family were against him, and he fought for his cause against apparently overwhelming odds. It was his courage and faith in Allah that brought him victory.

Previous to the days of the Prophet, the Arabians had sunk to the lowest degree — drunkenness, immorality and idolatry were at their height. The Kaaba, which, since the days of Abraham, had been used as the House of God (Beit Allah) was filled with idols of stone and wood which the Arabs worshipped. All this the Prophet changed.

Not one of the least courageous things he did was to smash all these idols (365), and while surrounded by enemies hurl them out of the Kaaba. I think that anyone who has been to Makkah can picture that scene and realize the danger to the Prophet and the courage it required.

Mentioning Mecca, I should like to say here that it seems to me a grand thing that the holy cities of Arabia, Makkah and Al-Madinah, are again being visited by Occidentals as well as by Orientals. This is as it was in the days of the Prophet. Everybody, desires world peace, well, there is nothing which will better accomplish that than the festival at the end of the Pilgrimage at Arafat, where all nationalities — black, white,

brown, yellow — all dressed alike, kings, beggars, poor and rich, side by side, offer up one universal hymn of praise to Allah. Surely, this equality should encourage world peace.

On account of excessive drunkenness, the Prophet banned intoxicants. Further, he was the first Prophet to elevate the status of women. Up to that time women had no real status; in fact, the Arabs used to bury their female babies alive. All this, the Prophet stopped and instituted laws, 1,356 years ago, establishing women's rights that, alas, do not exist yet in some European countries. To this day, in the Islamic laws which the Prophet introduced, a woman's possessions, whether money, land or anything else, are her own; even her husband cannot lay hands on them. There is a great misconception among Christians as regards women in Islam. For example, many Europeans have said to me 'Oh! According to your Prophet, you have no soul'. How this fallacy has crept into the Christian imagination is incomprehensible, because it is the reverse of all Muhammad's teachings, as the Prophet was always equalizing man and woman.

I cannot do better than finish by quoting an Englishman, Mr. Stanley Lene-Poole. Writing about the Prophet, he says:

"There is something so tender and withal so heroic about the man he who, standing alone braved for years the hatred of his people the frank-friendship, the noble generosity, the dauntless courage and hope of the man.. he was an enthusiast in the noblest sense when enthusiasm became the salt of the earth.. and his enthusiasm was noble for a noble cause. He brought his tidings to his people with a grand dignity sprung from the consciousness of his high office, together with a most sweet humility."^[1]

Thus wrote a man who was not a Muslim."

A'isha Wentworth-Fitz-William

^[1] A speech delivered on the celebration of the Holy Prophet's Birthday in London. *The Islamic Review*, Augs. 1937, Vol. 25, No. 8, pages 314-316.

Why I embraced Islam

We reproduce below an extract from an article by Begum Amina Lakhani, Ohio, U.S.A., about her conversion to Islam — *Editor*.

A Western Woman and Her Culture

When a western woman, such as myself, turns towards Islam, the road is long and sometimes difficult beyond description. The result of such a conversion is a new life filled with learning and self-awareness of a woman's place in Allah's great universe.

The western culture uses its women towards its own goals. T.V. commercials are inundated with lessons that teach everyone what they must desire. A slim figure seems essential because the clothing advertised exposes everything on a western woman, except her intelligence. There are books, by the millions, published about *How to be a Sex Symbol*, *How to Make Friends* and so many more *How To's* for the poor inept soul that cannot sell itself to the buying public. Everythings has a price and everything must be desired. A woman, in this system, is used and conversely must use other. The system feeds upon itself. Such was my thinking before coming to Islam.

A Muslim Woman and Islamic Culture

When I approached Islam, first by reading the Divine Qur'an and then by studying Islam, I wondered at its simplicity. Life in the western culture is so endlessly complicated by false needs and desires. At first Islam seems to be unintelligible to a westerner simply because we are always taught that life must be filled with self-gratification and self-seeking pleasure and

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any mode of thinking that does not follow that basic line must always be wrong. I had to reconstruct my entire consciousness.

Islam is more logical, yet it contradicts everything that I was ever taught. When one spends an entire lifetime demanding self-abuse in the name of freedom, the prospect of a life dedicated to Allah, instead of selfish desires, becomes frightening as well as exciting. The mere notion that there is another, a better way, is difficult to accept, because we are always taught that the Western way is the only way. It is much easier to look into the mirror and see a reflection of make-up and false smiles than it is to look into one's own soul and see a reflection of emptiness and a life without hope, without Allah. Therefore, the first step towards Islam (beginning with total dedication) requires courage and conviction. Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) first charted the road to Islam so many years ago. Courage, faith, steadfastness and prayers are the weapons needed, to reach the destination.

Islam is a total life system that enjoins respect for the purity of life. It insures purity of family life as well as purity of the individual. A woman is a special individual in the eyes of Allah and not just a produce for commercialization. The exploitation of woman does not exist in Islam. We are not used, abused or sold for a higher economic gain.

A woman accepting Islam must learn and recognize that exploitation and commercialization of the female are a sin and they should not blindly accept being used and exploited.

A Muslim woman is a respected member of the Muslim community, contributing in a positive way to family and community life.

With the respect given, the Muslim women also comes to possess responsibility. One must keep oneself pure from alcohol, drugs and general immoralities forced upon one by the

western culture. There are daily incentives and enticements towards sin on T.V., Radio, newspapers, movies and every aspect of western life. These are daily reminders that a life of sin is normal and even a requirement for a happy existence. Co-workers and neighbors do not like to be around anyone who does not help them in pursuing their life of ease and luxury. It is during these times that the weapons of courage, faith, steadfastness and prayer are needed the desired aim...

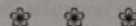
Allah's Blessing on a Muslim Woman

Muslim woman must be stronger and more confident than other women. To be a Muslim woman living in the western world today is a great responsibility, but the rewards may be blessings for all mankind. If by our practical example, of eternal faith and purity of life, we could each bring just one other woman to Islam there would be a better world for all. Islam is a viable total life system that gives promise of a better tomorrow to the troubled world of today.

I am proud of being a Muslim woman because only in Islam are Allah's blessings so bountiful.

May Allah Almighty grant us the sense of distinguishing between right and wrong, enjoining what is right averting what is wrong.^[1]

Begum Amina Lakhani
(Ohio, U.S.A)



^[1] Courtesy: *Yekeen International*, Karachi (Pakistan) July 7-22, 1991, page 47 — Editor.

Islam: My own Choice

You may see me walk down the street or in the mall with a group of friends, giggling, laughing, bags in hand and having the time of our lives. But, you notice that I am different, thoughts of 'terrorist' 'rag head' or 'slave' may ring in your ears and you may even giggle and watch me, your eyes glued to me with wonder. Yes, I do notice these looks and I came imagine those thoughts. You notice my fair skin, blue eyes, blonde hair, fairly typical in America, then you notice the loose clothing and the long blue scarf (*Hijab*) that covers my long hair and you feel ashamed of me and look away in disgust.^[1]

I am a 17 year old Caucasian American girl who happens to be Muslim, not by birth, but by my own choice. I converted from Catholicism to Islam 2 years ago.

I am mainly writing this because many Muslims in America, myself included, feel that many of our fellow Americans associate our peaceful religion with hatred and the slavery of its women! I cannot say why I converted in this article because it could fill a novel! All I can say is after intense research for a year on all religions I felt closest to Allah (God) when I read the Qur'an and read about Islam, a feeling that Christianity could not give me! That is why I converted. I must admit, it is very hard, going from the 'free-wheeling', typical American lifestyle to one of praying, modesty and spiritual freedom. Islam is a fairly simple religion, with a few rules, but the rules you must follow as much as you can.

All these rules about what is allowed (*Halal*) or prohibited (*Haram*) were all written down in the Qur'an or the *Ahadith*

^[1] Courtesy: *The Islamic Voice*; May 1998, page 22 published under the title *Why I embraced Islam?* — Editor.

that Allah (God) gave to his last Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings be upon him) over 1400 years ago in Makkah in what is now Saudi Arabia. Unlike many other religions there are no real conflicts over how the religion can be interpreted as it is all in the Qur'an. Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is called the religion of the book because these religions are based on 'books' or scriptures from God to his Prophet. As Muslims we respect and we believe in Moses, Abraham, Jesus (Isa) the virgin Mary (Maryam) and that the last Prophet that God has sent to the earth was Muhammad (may the peace and blessings be upon him). In Islam, we only worship the one, supreme God, Allah who can be neither man nor woman. We highly respect Muhammad (may the peace and blessings be upon him) but do not worship him, we also respect all the above mentioned Prophets before him.

Sadly there are many 'false rumors' about Islam, for some reason or the other people tend to prefer these false rumors to the truth. As Muslims we see each other as 'brothers and sisters' and many of us call our fellow Muslims as 'brother David' or 'sister Fatima', like in Christianity. In the Qur'an, Allah (God) specified that when you see a fellow Muslim you should greet him with at least a *Salam* (peace). In many 'Islamic' countries, the system and following of Islam actually is not considered true Islam, it's a 'mixture' of the culture and the religion. In many Muslims countries, the government women have to wear the *Chadar* or *Burq'ha* and are prohibited from working, education, or driving.

All these practices are cultural, in many of those countries the *Chadar* was worn by the wealthy Persian, Christians, Hindus and Assyrians as a form of social snobbery, and again many of these practices that are now considered Islamic are not Islamic at all! If you read the Qur'an, or the *Ahadith* it is stated women, like men must be educated, women can work, hold careers and

keep any money that they make, have the freedom to be outspoken, worldly humans. In the past not many women in the Islamic countries were educated so they had no idea of all the freedom that Allah has given them, and had written down in the Qur'an. They were taught about Islam and its laws by men who were not very kind and felt that in order to be powerful they had to keep their women illiterate and dependent on their men for everything.

In fact, Islam is one of the first religions to give women equality. Even though it was not practiced in many Islamic countries as such until those Muslim women became educated in the recent era.

You are, may be, wondering why Muslim women wear the scarves to cover their hair and dress in loose clothing. In the Qur'an, Allah wrote that girls past puberty should not wear their clothing, and should cover themselves to keep from being assaulted by men. It is specified that a Muslim women should wear *Hijab*, which basically means 'cover', which is basically a head covering that covers the hair, neck and ears and is opaque, such as a scarf or *Khimar* (scarf that also covers the chest) and wear clothing that is loose, and only exposes the hands and face. It is up to the individual if you wish to wear loose jeans and a sweater and a head scarf or wear a *Jilbab* (loose dress that covers the whole body) and a head scarf or be extreme and wear *Niqab* (face veil), gloves and *Chadar* (a sheet-like covering that you wrap around your body) and it also depends upon the women's culture and ethnicity. Many Saudis think only the loose, long dress like outfits are acceptable, whereas others, such as Pakistanis, prefer the long loose pants under a tunic shirt (*Shalwar Kameeze*) I personally prefer the typical, wide leg jeans and sweaters and a colorful scarf. Of course, not all *Muslima's* wear *Hijab* for some reason or another. Also, Islam requires Muslim men to be modest too,

they cannot wear silk, gold, jewelry and be clothed fully from stomach to knee.

"Every religion has a characteristic, and the characteristic of Islam is modesty." (*Ibn Majah*)

In the Qur'an, Allah has stated that:

"... believing women should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; they should not display their ornaments except as is normal, they should draw their veils over their beauty except to their close male relatives..." (*Surat An-Nur*, 24:31)

Here are some basics of Islam. In Islam you must pray five times a day. When we pray we do many movements and say various prayers to Allah, we stand, we bow, we sit all to show that we are God's humble servants.

We are also required to fast from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan. For the whole month we refrain from drinking liquids or eating foods during day time. Of course if you are sick or for some reason can not fast, Allah does not make you fast, this is to discipline our minds and to understand how a poverty stricken would feel who does not get 3 meals a day. We also are to give alms to the poor, we celebrate *Eid-al-Fitr* and *Eid-al-Adha*, these are big holidays for Muslims like Christmas. For the *Eid-al-Fitr* we have a three-day feast after Ramadan is over and attend special services in the mosque and give small gifts. *Eid-al-Adha* is a major holiday right after the time of, the *Hajj*. The *Hajj* is required at least one time in a Muslim's lifetime (if they are able).

Did you know that the majority of Muslims are not Arab! It's a common belief that Muslims are all Arab. In reality a majority of Arabs are Muslims but many are Jewish or Christian. Indonesians and southeast Asians make up the majority of Muslims, and Islam is one of the fastest growing religion in

America. Many Europeans are traditionally Muslim as are many Africans and many Caucasian and Afro-Americans in North America are too. Islam is essentially a 'global' religion like Christianity or Judaism.

I sincerely hope that this has dispelled some common myths that almost everyone has about Islam. Islam is not a religion of terror, blood or hatred of its women, but a thoughtful, peaceful, modest religion that gets us closer to our Creator, Allah.^[1]

American Muslimaa



This is the story of how I became Muslim

The first time I seen a Muslim was while I was in college at the University of Arkansas. I will admit at first I stared at the women in their different clothing and the men with the towels wrapped around their heads and wearing night gowns.

But the first time I had the opportunity to know a Muslim lady that I felt comfortable with in asking questions, it started a thirst in my heart and soul that will never be quenched. *Alhamdulillah !!!*

I was born in Arkansas to Christian parents, who were also born in Arkansas. In fact as far back as I can trace all of my family has come from the Southern states here in the United States. I was raised here all my life on a farm, where you get up in the morning, milk cows, feed the chickens and do the rest of the chores. My father was a Baptist minister, which is just a

sect of Christianity, such as Catholics, Methodist, etc. These are all Christian religions, but with different doctrines. It could be best explained as similar to the differences between the Sunni and the Shiite. I am Sunni by the way. The town that I lived in was completely white raced and all Christians. In fact this was the scenario in a 300 mile radius of me. So I had never been exposed to any other cultures or religions. But I had always been taught that we were all created equal in the eyes of God, and that there was no difference in race, color, culture or religious practices. Later I discovered that this was easy for them to preach and teach as long as they stayed closed minded and these other people did not invade their world.

I will never forget her, she was from Palestine and I would sit for hours listening to stories about her country and the culture, but what intrigued me most was her religion, Islam. This lady had an inner peace about her, like no one I had ever seen. I can remember so well even today her telling me about the Prophets, peace be upon them, and Allah. Even though I had never voiced this to anyone, I had always questioned in my mind the concept of what Christians called the trinity and why we had to pray to Jesus (may peace be upon him!) and not to God directly, and why so much emphasis was put on Christ and not God.

My friend did everything she could do to convince me that Islam was the only religion that would take me to heaven, and that it was not just another religion, it was a way of life. My friend graduated six months later and returned to Palestine. She was killed two weeks later outside of her home. I was devastated, it was like a part of me had died with her. We knew that when she returned home our chances of ever seeing each other again in this life was very unlikely, but she told me that what was most important to her was that she had seen me in the here-after in Paradise.

^[1] baileyvaros17@hotmail.Com.

During this time I had met and made friends with a lot of people from the middle east. They also helped me deal with the loss of my friend. This was also when I came to love the Arabic language. It was beautiful. I would listen to their tapes of the Qur'an for hours, even though I didn't have any idea what they were saying. Even today, I love to have someone read to me from the Qur'an, and I still can't understand what is being said, but it still touches my heart and soul. I didn't have time to really learn any Arabic in college. I was lucky to remember my homework assignment. But I am trying very hard now to learn how to speak and read it. *In Sha' Allah*. And for those who have ever listened to me speak Arabic or type in English, they can tell you I have a long way to go. And I thank them for their patience and tutoring.

After I left college and returned to my community, I didn't have the honor to be around Muslims any longer. But the thirst had never left nor had my love and desire for the Arabic language which I might add, infuriated my parents and other friends. This confused me, because I had always been taught that we were all equal in God's eyes. I guess there were a few exceptions to this concept for my friends and family.

Then in the Spring of 1995, Allah brought someone into my life. This person was such a wonderful example of what a Muslim should be and what Islam was about that once again, I began to ask questions. I was even taken to my first mosque. That will be a memory that shall forever be etched into my memory.

For 8 months I studied everything he could possibly find me and read and listened to tapes continuously. Then on February 15, 1996, I officially embraced Islam. *Alhamdulillah!!!* Our engagement was broken because his parents were against the idea of him marrying an American. Even though we are no longer engaged, I respect and admire him greatly. And I would

never give up my Islam.

Since Feb. 15 my life has taken many turns. When I became engaged to an Arabian or foreigner, my family was in shock, they rarely spoke to me. I also lost most of my American friends. But when I embraced Islam, my family first tried to have me committed to a mental hospital, when that didn't work, they completely disowned me. They did make calls to me to tell me that they hoped I rotted in Hell and calls from my so called friends stated the same desire. Yes this hurt, even though my family and I had many differences, I still loved them deeply. *Al-Hamdulillah wa Subhana Allah my Iman* (faith in Islam) was strong.

The last time I spoke to my family was two days after the bombing in Saudi Arabia. My uncle and cousin were killed in the bombing... my family called again to tell me of the news and to assure me that my family members that were killed in the bombing love me... but their blood was on my head and all my terrorist friends. I cried for days, but once again, my *Iman* stood strong and I continued.

The next turn in my life was when I returned home one afternoon four days after the bombing to find that someone had shot at windows of my home, and spray painted "TERRORIST LOVER" down the side of one of my vehicles. The police were no help to me at all. That same night while chatting in the Muslim Chat; I heard gun shots ring out. They had returned, and finished almost all the remaining windows that were left in my home, and killed my pets that were outside.

Upon the arrival of the police I was told that unless I could give positive identifications of these people and the vehicles they were driving, then it would almost be impossible for them to be found. I begged them to check my vehicles for any damage. I wanted to go to a motel so I would feel safer. I was told

absolutely not, they were concerned that my TERRORISTS friends could have planted a bomb in one of them as a trap for the police. I crumbled to the ground on my knees crying out for Allah's mercy and guidance.

Allah answered very faithfully. I was attacked one night in a parking lot by an unknown man that proceeded to beat me, stab me, break my wrist and fracture some ribs.

This person has been caught, and is awaiting trial, but at this time he is only doing public service work for this town. Last week when I went to pick up my clothing at the dry cleaners I was informed they had been lost these articles included all my *Hijabs, Jilbabs, Abayahs* and *Khimars*. How convenient for them to lose these items.

The town I live in is very small and there are no other Muslims or Arabs even close. The closest mosque is 120 miles away. Even though I am alive as to the fact that I do not have any other Muslims to visit with and learn from. *Al-Hamdulillah*, Allah is always there!!

What little knowledge I have about Islam has been gained through reading everything I can find on the Internet, and through my true friends and family on the internet. I will never give up... but I would like to thank a very special Palestinian brother for his love, support, friendship and prayers during these past few weeks. You know who you are. God bless you richly. To my other Muslim brothers and sisters on the Internet, I love you and I thank you.

I am not writing this story in the hope of gaining pity. I do ask that everyone continue to pray for me, or anyone that is reading this to be assured that Allah will never let you down. But the injustices and prejudices that we Muslims face here in the United States and around the world has got to come to an end. It has to be acknowledged and dealt with, I know I am not alone in this fight. It is time that the media print and show the

true side of Islam. Allah will prevail!!!!

And one final thought, to my friend who first shared her knowledge of Islam with me I know that on February 15 of this year, you smiled down on me from paradise and gave Allah all the praises, and Allah's willing I will see you again.^[1]

Amirah



American woman's search ends with the Qur'an

Neither Rastas nor Jews; Only Islam has the Truth^[2]

In her search for the Ultimate Reality a young unmarried American mother walks the streets, talking to Rastafarians and Jews. She explores the *Bhagavad Gita*, encounters the so-called Nation of Islam and *Qadianis*. Eventually her search ends when she meets Muslims — Editor.

At the age of 23, I was a divorced mother of two and a college student. Because I had my children at a rather young age, I was just then beginning to enjoy a social life (so to speak). Then, and for several years prior to that I would spend my weekends 'partying' in New York City at what I can only describe now as nightclubs in which all kinds of negative behavior was apparent. Attending these nightclubs was considered the highlight of my week and I went there every Saturday night

^[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Voice*, February 1998, page 22

^[2] Courtesy: *Saudi Gazette Riyadh* (Saudi Arabia) Monday 12 October, 1998, page 12. — Editor

without fail.

One night I met these men who claimed that they were Hebrews. We got into a discussion about religion because I challenged them why they would choose to come to a club of that type if they held sincere religious beliefs. They claimed that they were part of a group of Black Hebrews, and went about outlining some of the beliefs embodied in their faith. I was annoyed by them because they were smoking and under the influence of drugs while claiming to have this conviction in their beliefs. I perceived that to be a contradiction.

At some point they began to talk about Abraham (Prophet Ibrahim) and how he had agreed to sacrifice his son Isaac, and that the Black Hebrews, not the Jews that we know are the true inheritors, chosen by *Yahweh* (God), and that theirs was the true religion. I continued to scrutinize them but listened attentively. I always had an interest in religion even as a child, however, I had never been able to read the Bible because I was always confused by the stories in Genesis (the first chapter of the Bible). I couldn't understand why religious people lie, fornicate, get drunk, etc. my mother observes a religion that is called 'Jehovah's Witnesses' and I had also been exposed to that as a child (I rejected it when I became a teenager).

As I listened to them I knew that there was something out of place in their story, but I could not identify what it was exactly. I told them that they had misstated something in their presentation and that their rationalization was inaccurate (I liked to debate with people then too.) I suggested (in a defiant manner) that if they came back the next week that I would know more to support my position and asserted in general that they "did not know what they were taking about" Neither did I.

One thing that had really disturbed me was that they had really disturbed me was that they had really disturbed me was that they had this insistence about their being chosen and that their

being 'black' was a significant factor in that special distinction I have argued with many people about the ridiculous position of ascribing God's preferences, dislikes, or love for any people because of the color of their skin, and beliefs that state that the 'white man' is the devil, and he was created by man; that man is God; God is Jealous, etc. How would they know. They made God seem so petty and discriminating. I also thought this kind of talk about God diminished His greatness.

As a college student I had access to many libraries, so during the next week in between classes I went to several campus libraries looking first for the Torah, and then I thought I would look at other books if necessary.

I didn't know what I was looking for but I believed that if I couldn't refute them with words from the Torah (the books of the Jews, to my knowledge). I would find what I was looking for in that mixed up chapter in the Bible called Genesis, the only scripture I had some familiarity with.

I couldn't find a *Torah* in the library! I found other books though. Many others that I scanned through and could not find the answer. I scanned through the Apocalypse, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and other books by authors of religious topics that I just fingered through. I didn't know what I was looking for! I thought I would look in the Qur'an (as I knew nothing of it). But I couldn't find a Qur'an at the library either. The week was growing short and I was running out of time. Then I remembered that my sister had a friend who was a Muslim. He would have a Qur'an I thought, and maybe he would loan it to me. He did.

Between that day and that Saturday night, I read as much of the Qur'an as I could. I was immersed in it. As I read the Verses in English, I repeated to myself over and over again, this is what I have always thought and believed. What kind of book was this?

Before long I was reading the book and crying, and reading and crying. It was as if something had overtaken me. I forgot what I was looking for in particular, however when I came upon the Verses in *Surat Al-Baqarah*, 122-141 regarding Prophet Ibrahim (may peace be upon him!) I had found my answer. I had been searching for Ismael, son of Prophet Ibrahim and first wife Hajirah, who had been missing from the Hebrew brother's story. In those Verses I found the truth of religion:

"They say: Become Jews or Christians if ye would be guided (to salvation). Say thou: 'Nay! (I would rather) the religion of Abraham the True, and he joined not gods with Allah. Say ye: 'We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham Esmael Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given (All) the Prophets from their Lord: we make no difference between one another of them and we submit to Allah'." (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2:135-136)

As I continued to read and cry, I became intent upon finding someone who could introduce me to others who believed in this book!

That Saturday night, I returned to that nightclub, but not to stay. I found those Rastafarian people and told them about Ismail who had been missing in their story, and of course they argued that it was Isaac and not Ismael who had been the object of Prophet Ibrahim's sacrifice. Needless to say, I didn't have enough to argue with them to convince them, nor did I want to. I just wanted to get out of there. They could believe whatever they wanted to believe, and I was anxious to believe. I had found my belief in Allah and I was anxious to find someone who could provide me contacts with other Muslims. I felt repulsed by the environment and stated to myself while leaving that I would never go there again. There were a couple of men who "might be Muslims," I thought, who were familiar

to me because they sold pies, cakes, a newspaper door-to-door that was about Islam. I had always associated them with the Nation of Islam, an organization which I subsequently discovered are more like the *Qadiani* religion than the Muslim religion.

These followers of Elijah Muhammad, who claimed to be a Prophet (like his master Wallace D. Fard, a Qadiani whom Elijah called 'god') and their contemporary leader Louis Farrakhan, do not make *Salaat*, they believe the "white man is the devil." There is more about them which repulsed me, but this is neither the place nor time to wage a campaign against them. Nonetheless, I wanted nothing to do with them, but it had been many years since I had last argued with some of the followers of those beliefs and maybe these men were different. I was determined to ask them some specific questions when I next saw them.

Before the week's end, one of them (would you believe his name was Ismail) knocked on my door to ask if I wanted to buy some cakes they were selling. I got very excited when I saw him, and I asked him to wait at my door a minute. I ran to get the Holy Qur'an, carried it to my front door and asked him: "Do you follow the religion that is described in this book?" He was startled by my question but did not hesitate to say "Yes".

I also asked him if he belonged to that group, the Nation of Islam, and he told me that he used to but that he didn't anymore because they had disbanded and were practicing the 'real' religion of Islam, like Malcolm X did. I then asked him if he could take me to wherever they meet, because I had by then read most of the book and I wanted to become a Muslim. He was very happy to say yes.

That Sunday, in July, 1979, I declared my *Shahadah* after a study program at a mosque in New York City. Striving in the cause of Islam and developing a sincere knowledge and practice

of the faith has been my commitment ever since. I still have that same Qur'an with several others I still enjoy reading regularly. I also particularly enjoy giving them as a gift to anyone who expresses any interest in Islam. It is my prayer that Allah continue to guide those in search of the truth to His religion, perfected for mankind.

I apologize for being so long. This is the first time I have ever written the story of my conversion, and so I had to get it all out.

Hanan Abdullateef



Her intellect brought Amnah to Islam through Arabic^[1]

There are weekly lectures here in Jeddah given by native Arabic-speakers fluent in English, who translate various *Ayat* of the Qur'an and the *Tafsir* of such notables as Ibn Kathir. I have been attending these lectures for quite some time when one day I was astonished to find an American woman doing the translation. How was she able to do it? I remember thinking she must have had Arab parents and spoken both languages at home to be so fluent. She moreover seemed so knowledgeable about Islam. She never hesitated answering anyone's questions.

^[1] Courtesy: *The Islamic Voice*, Bangalore (India) *Why I embraced Islam* was written by Mrs. N. Hashim. We feel obliged in reproducing this heart-rending 'Reversion to Islam Story' for our esteemed brothers and sisters, and are thankful *The Islamic Voice* in which it was first published in November 1996 on page 18. — Editor.

Out of admiration and curiosity I wanted to talk to her but I must admit I was intimidated by someone so informed and had no idea of how to approach her.

What would be my first question? I had to find out how she learned to read the Arabic language so well. To my surprise, Amnah did not have Arab parents but took it upon herself to learn Arabic so she could read the Qur'an its original language. But why? Everyone I know first became Muslim then attempted to learn Arabic so they could understand the Qur'an. And she is doing opposite. Her story is quite impelling

Amnah's father was a noted American geologist and being a Scientist, of course, he was a deductive reasoner. She says her father had a great influence on her way of thinking and whilst she used to accompany him to the laboratory on occasions, her mother encouraged her to attend church, and at an early age she started asking various questions about religion. The fact that she was an only child may have made her more contemplative than most. As sometimes is the case, she became disenchanted with her religion and stopped attending church. She often wondered about the existence of God. Her mother believed in God without question and her father questioned without belief. Quite a dilemma for some-one trying to find answers.

While I was listening to her I couldn't help but think that she is such an enigma. It is difficult to imagine a time when she was not a Muslim. She exudes piety and righteousness and is one of the most humble of people I have ever met. Attending one of her lectures, she appeared almost embarrassed to be able to read and translate into English. What an ability!

As most parents probably do, hers had envisioned a comfortable middle class life for her in Southern California after she finished University. As she readily admits, what happened next was not in their plan, nor hers.

She married her Arabic-speaking husband and moved to his home in Syria. She desperately sought to understand Islam and had admired its tenets for quite some time. She questioned those around her in the effort to understand why and how they had such faith. Her husband rebuked her often for the questions she asked. He said if she had any faith she would not ask such things. That was exactly what she was trying to get.

Growing up in America had taught her that different religions had only meant various paths to the same goal. A person simply chose one that suited him, or he didn't choose at all. She found literature about Islam in English insufficient and the translations of the Qur'an seemed baffling. The only way to comprehend was to simply learn the language.

Very slowly faith came and she prayed to God, that if He was true, He would make Himself known to her. From the intensive intellectual effort she realized that the Qur'an was indeed an inspired book and that the Creator of the Universe not only existed but communicated with His creatures:

"Verily this is no less than a message to (all) the worlds."
(*Surat At-Takwir*, 81:21)

At this point one would assume that she became a Muslim immediately. However, when she perceived the responsibility involved in being a Muslim she hesitated. She was torn between the desire to live according to God's law and the fear that she did not have the self-control and discipline required. She prayed and fasted and paid *Zakat* but felt if she never declared her Islam she could not be held accountable.

After a two-year course and another year of private lessons she began to struggle through reading the Qur'an with the assistance of dictionaries and commentaries. She discovered a whole world of scholarly works on Islam.

Gradually she began to understand that we are just as much,

responsible for what we neglect to do:

"Whosoever desires a way other than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him and in the hereafter he will be among the losers." (*Surat Al-Imran*, 3:85)

She laughingly told me the story of what happened to her when she made it known that she was ready to say the *Shahadah*. She was warned that she would first have to be questioned by a priest. At this point she felt she could handle anything but was told that after a meeting with this priest many people were upset and shaken by the experience. Regardless, she wanted to continue and studied for two days before the meeting trying to anticipate what he would ask her and the answers to his questions in the Qur'an. As she watched the look of fear and anticipation on the faces of her husband and witnesses, she met with the priest.

In addition to the religious questions, she knew he would resort to a type of psychological blackmail and he tried to frighten her by asking what her parents would say when they found out she had converted. After his unsuccessful attempt to dissuade her she exited from this encounter victorious. How surprised her family and friends were when they saw the look of dejection on the face of the priest. After twelve long years she had finally done it. She was a Muslim.

Suddenly she found doors of knowledge opened to her that increased her Faith and gave her the ability to make the changes in her life once thought impossible. These were basic healthy changes outlook and personality and in her life-style and that of her family. She says that this alone was reward enough, yet it is but a small part of God's limitless generosity.

Since then, Amnah has written and published a book in Arabic which is intended to help Arabic speaking Muslims appreciate and make use of the guidance that God placed within their easy reach.

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She laughingly told me the story of what happened to her when she made it known that she was ready to say the *Shahadah*. She was warned that she would first have to be questioned by a priest. At this point she felt she could handle anything but was told that after a meeting with this priest many people were upset and shaken by the experience. Regardless, she wanted to continue and studied for two days before the meeting trying to anticipate what he would ask her and the answers to his questions in the Qur'an. As she watched the look of fear and anticipation on the faces of her husband and witnesses, she met with the priest.

In addition to the religious questions, she knew he would resort to a type of psychological blackmail and he tried to frighten her by asking what her parents would say when they found out she had converted. After his unsuccessful attempt to dissuade her she exited from this encounter victorious. How surprised her family and friends were when they saw the look of dejection on the face of the priest. After twelve long years she had finally done it. She was a Muslim.

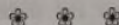
Suddenly she found doors of knowledge opened to her that increased her Faith and gave her the ability to make the changes in her life once thought impossible. These were basic healthy changes outlook and personality and in her life-style and that of her family. She says that this alone was reward enough, yet it is but a small part of God's limitless generosity.

Since then, Amnah has written and published a book in Arabic which is intended to help Arabic speaking Muslims appreciate and make use of the guidance that God placed within their easy reach.

Through its' popularity she was requested to do an English version entitled *Transition From Doubt to Assurance*, and it is inspiring to say the least:

"Seest thou not how Allah sets forth a parable? A goodly word like a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the heavens (*Surat Ibrahim*.14:24)^[1]

Amnah



Islam religion of tolerance, good behavior, love and mercy,^[2]

Ann Rockefeller, a British physician, worked at the Institute of Clinical Blood Research of London prior to her marriage to an Egyptian.

Following her marriage, 18 years ago, she shifted from London to Cairo, reported *Al-Dawa* magazine in its latest issue.

Although her Egyptian husband was indifferent about Islam and its reforming rituals, Rockefeller was interested in Islam.

"Prior to my coming to Egypt I knew nothing about Islam, but I was impressed by the good nature of the Egyptian people and their tolerance," she said and added, "I am now confident that Islam is the religion of tolerance, mercy, love and good behavior.

"When I came to Egypt I realized the difference in the values

^[1] Saudi Gazette

^[2] courtesy : Riyadh Daily; Friday, May 15, 1998, page 9

that exist in the west the values that prevail in Egypt and I jumped to the conclusion that Islam was the cause of this difference," she elaborated.

"Although my husband is a Muslim, I heard no word from him about Islam and I never saw him performing the Islamic rituals," said Rockefeller and added, "My husband did not know that I performed Islam except after five years to my decision to embrace Islam," she said.

"When my husband," she added, "Came to know that I have embraced Islam, he remained indifferent."

Rockefeller said she has been doing her best to implant the values of Islam

In the hearts of her daughter, Yassemin and moreover has successfully persuaded her husband to perform the Islamic rituals.

Rockefeller regrets that the westerners have wrong ideas about Islam because they are influenced by the information they receive from the Western media.

The Westerners believe that Islam is the religion of terrorism, backwardness and ignorance, she said.

The Westerners have no antagonistic attitudes towards Islam, and they are ready to embrace Islam, if they have been provided with proper ideas about it, she noted.

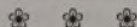
Rockefeller said she has been working to clarify the principles of Islam to her relatives in England and to persuade them to embrace Islam.

"The best way for preaching Islam is to behave well and to implant its values in the hearts of the new generations," she said.

Rockefeller underscored the role that could be played by the housewife in the service of Islam because the housewife stands

as an example for her sons and daughters.

Ann Rockefeller (A British Physician)



Why I Embraced Islam^[1]

Islam has been described as being the religion of *Fitrah*, the innate nature of all humans. It is not surprising therefore, when we discover that Islam is being accepted as the only pure way of life a person can follow, by millions of reverts around the world. Statistics show that out of every 5 who revert to Islam, 4 are females. This blows away the false concept that Islam is a repressive religion for women. The following is one account of a sister who submitted to Allah as her Lord, took Islam as her religion, and Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) as her Messenger

I have always, since developing an ability to think deeply, believed in the existence of a single Creator, on whom everything that exists is dependent. Though my parents are Buddhists, from the age of 13, I have steadfastly prayed to the creator, and asked for guidance every day that I can remember. Yet, being schooled within a Christian environment, I naturally identified myself as a Christian.

Sadly, my knowledge of Islam was minimal. I perceived it as a bizarre religion, limited to only a few underdeveloped nations, most of which were in the Middle East, and which endorsed an astoundingly suppressive life-style, particularly for women.

^[1] Courtesy: *Da'wah Highlights*, Islamabad (Pakistan) November 1996, Vol. 7, No. 11, page 44-47 — Editor

Muslim women. I presumed, were considered inferior — a passive domestic slave, bashed often and forced to compete among four for her husband's affections, which he would withhold from them all if he wanted to. The majority of these ideas I developed from hearsay, interactions with others I assumed knew what they were talking about and a few documentaries on Iran and Saudi Arabia I watched on television. As I entered the university nearly three years ago, I came into contact with quite a number of Muslim students from various backgrounds. Strangely enough, even to myself, I was drawn to them and developed a curious inclination to learn and understand more about their religion. I observed how content they seemed and was very impressed by their openness and warmth towards myself and each other, but more importantly with their pride in belonging to a religion which holds many negative connotations.

I gradually became fascinated with Islam, and through a process of education, developed a greater respect for it than even my beloved Christianity. I was stunned at how wrong my previous conception had been and became particularly overwhelmed at the tremendous entitlements, equality and acknowledgment Islam provided for women. I realized the reality of the Islamic life-style and the truth concerning that feeble American innovation termed 'Islamic fundamentalism'. It is said that any person who possess the faculty of reason and an open mind should recognise logic and truth when he/she encounters it, and so it was in my case.

More and more, literature, signs and evidence were revealed to me, and more and more, my intellect was stimulated and my heart, warmed. I wanted to know everything about Islam and felt already a sense of belonging among its followers. What impressed me the most was how practical Islam is — how it encompasses a rule and a lesson for almost every facet of

living. And by the sheer grace of God, I at last understood the faults of Christian theology and of the concepts I had previously accepted unquestioningly.

At midday, on August 4th, 1994, before over 20 witnesses, I recited the *Shahadah* and became a Muslim. I shall never forget the bliss of that day and how much my life has tuned around in only a year's time. I have often been asked what it is like to be a revert and of the difficulties I must endure. Though I do not wish to dwell on this topic, as pity is not my priority, I shall give some examples of what I have been through.

The period until the end of Ramadhan was, by far, the hardest to get through. Family disputes took place almost daily: I was showered with verbal abuse, ridicule and threats. On many occasions my room was physically torn apart, books mysteriously disappeared and slanderous phone messages were sent to my friends and their parents.

There have been times I have been locked out of home and forced to abstain from dinner as pork was deliberately served. Even to this day, all my mail is opened before I have the chance to do so myself. Apart from my housing and meals, I must provide for myself financially. My readings, as my conversations over the phone are done in privacy. My writings and my visits to mosques or other Islamic venues must always be concealed. I am similarly not able to visit friends very often as I may be 'brain-washed' even more.

I cannot perform my prayers until I am sure no one is around. Nor can I express, my excitement and celebration during Ramadhan. I cannot share the joy at knowing yet another sister has put on *Hijab*, nor can I discuss the lesson I have learned this day or the speech given by an Islamic scholar/scientist. Moreover, I must continually defend the Muslims and the Islam portrayed on the media, and fight against the stereotypes my parents stubbornly maintain.

To see their expressions of disgust at myself is almost unbearable. I am now insecure as to my parents affections and constantly worry of how much I am hurting them. Through the entire month of Ramadhan, my mother spoke to me not once. I had to hear her say time and again at how I had betrayed the family. My pleading with her otherwise was to no avail. I am told over and over again that what I have done is unforgivable and if any of our relations or already few friends knew, my parents would surely be outcasts.

However, I do not claim to have miserable life. I am more content and at peace now than I ever have been. My purpose in relating all of this is to try to display the opportunities that many of you have which are so often taken for granted, so little taken advantage of, but so precious to many reverts like myself.

To reflect on these hardships alone would imply I have gained nothing by becoming a Muslim other than pain. On the contrary, Islam has given me already so many vast rewards, I shiver to think of how much more wonderful the gifts of Paradise would be.

At the time of my reversion, although I had accepted Islam as being true, I had no idea of the vast internal changes it would incur upon me. Even I am astounded at how much I devour knowledge, how Islam is in my thoughts every waking moment, how compelling I feel my responsibility is to the Ummah and how much more of a Muslim I became every month.

It is as if as one's life in Islam progresses, it spreads to encompass and govern every cellular and spiritual dimension in oneself.

Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that: Allah's Messenger (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) once said: "Allah said... and My slave keeps coming

closer to Me... then I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grasps, and his legs with which he walks... (*Sahih Al-Bukhari*). This is precisely my experience.

Remarkably, from one religion, I have gained a profound insight into the operations of human behavior and sociology, as well as geophysics and astronomy. As I mature, it becomes clearer and clearer to me that again and again, it is Islam that has already answered the social and economic dilemmas of our time.

Over the past year, I have developed quite an extensive breadth of Islamic knowledge and have studied *Ayat*, of the Holy Qur'an in much finer detail. Not once have I come across anything which would make me doubt the authenticity of the Qur'an and the relevance of Islam for contemporary society, for even one minute. This has been the only religion I have ever been completely sure of and am more sure of each day that I serve.

Furthermore, I have established my identity, I am more confident of myself, a stronger woman and person of color, I am more aware of my existence and more secure in my battles. If I have achieved anything through this article, my hope is that I have depicted the greatness and mercy of our Glorious Sovereign, who makes all things possible. Allah says: "He guides therewith whom He pleases" (*Surat Az-Zumar*, 39: 23). Truly, I have been blessed to be one of those who have personally received the light and whose heart has been ordained to accept it.^[1]

Asyia Abd



^[1] Courtesy: Australian Islamic Review

Got the guidance from Allah

Mrs. Ayishah Hassan, born as Christian, was called Jacqueline Ruth Pugh before she entered the fold of Islam. After a thorough and deep study of the Holy Qur'an which left an unforgettable impression in her life, she left her previous faith and became a *Muslimah*.

She worked in different capacities such as Civil Servant, telephonist and special police constable. Currently she is working as a *Da'ee*, i.e. preaching Islam at Regent Park Mosque, London.

"And who is more excellent in speech than the one who calls towards Allah While he himself does righteous deeds and says: Admittedly I am from the obedient ones (Muslims)." (*Surat Fussilat*, 41:33)

Even married and having 3 children she is an active *Da'aeyya*. Her story of reversion to Islam is very exciting and thought provoking. One night, she knelt down beside her bed and recited the Lord's prayer in the same way as her father had told her years before. She pleaded God to guide her to the 'Right Path', forgive her sins and help her to do good for others because she had lost her faith and gone astray. She purchased a copy of the Bible and studied it deeply. She took one copy of it but at the same time, she saw a copy of the Holy Qur'an. She returned the Bible and picked up the Holy Qur'an. She was very much surprised when she saw the name of Jesus along with other Prophets, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Joseph. She was amazed when she realized that we Muslims believe in the same Prophet as the Christians:

"The Messenger (Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) believes in what has been sent down

to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers. Each one believes in Allah, His Angels, His Books, and His Messengers. They say, "We make no distinction between one another of His Messengers" and they say, "We hear, and we obey. (We seek) Your Forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the return (of all)" (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2:285)

She, thereupon, bought a copy of the Holy Qur'an and took it her home. When she started studying it, she realized that the guidance she had asked God for a night before, was right in her hands:

"Verily, This Qur'an guides to that which is most just and right and gives glad tidings to the believers (in the Oneness of Allah and His Messenger, Muhammad, (the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), who work deeds of righteousness, that they shall have a great reward (Paradise)" (*Surat Al-Isra*, 17:9:17:82)

After perusing the Holy Qur'an, she came to know that the message in the Holy Qur'an is for the whole mankind. In this way, God guided her to the 'Right Path', i.e. Islam.

Here is the 'reversion to Islam' story of sister Ayisha Hassan — Editor.

Ayisha Hassan was born Jacqueline Ruth Pugh. She was a Christian during her childhood, but later lost her faith in religion. She embraced Islam after reading the Holy Qur'an which left a deep impression in her life.

Ayisha, who has worked as a Civil Servant, telephonist, and special police constable, is currently involved in the propagation and teaching of Islam at Regents Park Mosque, London, U.K. She is now married and has three children.

As a child I used to enjoy going to Sunday school, and I can remember once promising myself that I would read the Bible

from cover to cover.

Several years later, after marrying and becoming the mother of two children, I decided to go to church one day and I noticed that I didn't feel the same warmth that I had known as a child. There was so much happening in terms of women priests, home sexuality, and various other alarming stories. For some reason it no longer felt right, and it was no longer the place it had once been.

As a child, wherever I did anything wrong or felt in need of God's help, I would go to the nearest church and ask God to help me and forgive me.

One night, I knelt down beside my bed and recited the Lord's prayer. In the manner my father had taught me years before, I asked God to guide me along the right way, to forgive me or my sins, and to help me to do good for others, as I had lost my faith and strayed far from the beliefs that I once held.

The next day I decided to go out and buy a copy of the Bible and read it from cover to cover. I went to the local bookshop, where I picked up one of the versions they had for sale, and instead of taking it straight to the checkout, I started to browse through its pages. As I was doing so, my eyes looked upwards and I saw another religious book called the Qur'an. I put the Bible back into its place and picked up the Holy Qur'an. I opened the book and was surprised to discover that Jesus was mentioned in it as were various other Prophets such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Joseph.

I was amazed when I realized that Muslims believed in the same Prophets as we did, and so I bought the Qur'an and took it home with me. I started to read it and I began to realize that the guidance I had asked God for the night before was right here in my hands. As time passed on, I came to realize that the message in the Holy Qur'an is for all of mankind, and so I became a Muslim straight away.

God says in the Holy Qur'an:

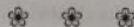
Now I have completed your religion revealing much which I revealed to you before from Me and confirming that which is true and correcting that which is false.

As many of us know, the Bible was recorded sixty-three years after the death of Jesus (may peace be upon him!). Furthermore, the Bible has been rewritten many times over the years and consequently it is significantly distorted today. God wants us to know this, and He points this fact out in the Holy Qur'an.

It is now my opinion that if anyone requires true guidance, then they should pray and ask sincerely for His guidance, salvation, and forgiveness; and in return He will guide you towards Islam, God Willing.

What I have forbidden to you, avoid; what I have ordered you to do, do as much of it as you can, it was only their excessive questioning and their disagreeing with their Prophets that destroyed those who were before you. (An-Nawawi's 40 Hadith). -(Source courtesy the MWL Journal)^[1]

Ayishah Hassan Jacoueline Ruth Pugh



^[1] Courtesy: *Riyadh Daily*, Friday, August 14, 1998 page.

Islam Changed My Life^[1]

Allah in His infinite wisdom created me to be a Muslim of eastern European descent living in the U.S. It might seem 'unique' for a white girl from a small, Midwestern town to be Muslim. The two may seem world's apart. Unfortunately, Islam is the most misunderstood religion. Muslims are unjustly associated with terrorism, radicalism and senseless violence.

My growing years were unextraordinary. As a Roman Catholic, I was baptized, took my first communion, performed my first confession and attended mass and catechism classes. Early in life I wondered why there were different religions. My mother seemed silly, however. After all, we all believed in God. What did all the rest matter? Many things I saw did not sit well with me. I had questions no one could answer except in vague idealistic terms. I did not understand Jesus (peace be upon him). Was he a man or God? I could not accept a man walking on water or performing miracles. To me it sounded like David Copperfield using illusions to trick people.

One summer evening, just before turning fourteen years old, I climbed on top of the roof of our house. I marveled at the glorious beauty of an animated moon. I wondered how anyone could look at such a sight and not believe in God. I did not profess a religion at the time. All I knew was I believed in One Creator of All, Master of a Judgment Day. I felt a desire to fulfill this spiritual nature through practice, not just profession. It was there I made a solemn vow to God dedicating my life to helping others.

^[1] This is the 'Reversion to Islam' story of sister Bahria Amanullah. We feel obliged to the *Riyadh Daily* in reproducing the same to our brothers and sisters. It was published in the said paper on Friday, November 6, 1998 on page 8. — Editor

Allah blessed me that day with a purpose, yet I lacked direction. I quickly got caught up in all the liberal movements. Racism was my primary focus (nothing strikes a chord in me like oppression due to skin color). Also, the Catholic stand on abortion seemed archaic. It was absurd that an elderly man committed unnaturally to lifelong celibacy should regulate our sex lives. It was chauvinistic to the extreme. The sermons 'love' one another were criminally vague and lacked real substance.

At seventeen, I moved on my own into the city. For several years my life was a nightmare of instability, direction less searching and unfulfillment. I floated from job to job, place to place, never satisfied and always looking for something to make my life happy. It was self destructing.

Finally, I read the autobiography of Malcolm X. In the life and teachings of Brother El-Hajj Malik Shabaz I found the direction I had so desperately searched for. I had caught a serious glimpse of the straight path. By the mercy of Allah it was now in my heart. Malcom's letters written from Makkah touched me deeply. I did not yet know what to do with this new found knowledge, but I now had a firm foundation to strive from.

At this point the only reason I did not embrace Islam was the interference of my own choice views, and adherence to misconceptions of women's status in Islam. It seemed like a plunge into darkness. I thought it was too strict for me and my arrogantly self-righteous liberal views. I did not yet understand the reason for discipline. I did not want to let go of things mistook as pleasurable, because I had no real comprehension of how harmful they actually were to my physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. However, the inescapable truth had touched me despite my resistance. Islam was a step into the light not a plunge into darkness.

I came into contact with the Islamic community through a radio station called KUCB. I listened to several Muslim

personalities on air and became deeply impressed by their strength, courage, ceaseless commitment and experienced knowledge. KUCB is under attack from the FCC. Through Allah's merciful guidance I went to the station to offer my self. There I met Imam Ako Abdul Samad, the station's vice president. Imam Ako asked me what I wanted to do. He was enthusiastically supportive of my desire to write and organize against racism. In getting started, he proved to be instrumental. He selflessly gave time, advice, encouragement and offered a clear direction. At long last! I began to ask questions. Imam Ako began by explaining Islam simply means submission (to One God) and a Muslim is one who submits (to One God). Allah is the One Creator of all. My early assertion that we all worshipped God and that is what is important came back to me. I became indelibly impressed by the unifying beauty of One God. The answers came swiftly in terms so easy to understand. I had never accepted the concept of the Trinity; now I knew why.

My confusion regarding Jesus (may Allah peace be upon him!) was now made clear He was not son of God. God is far above the base reality of human reproduction. Jesus (may Allah peace be upon him!) was a Prophet, a Messenger of God. The miracles attributed to him were not so much performed by Allah through him. Now, I also understood my own inner self regarding abortion. Islam put all elements in the proper perspective. Like many young women, I had been misled into thinking anti-abortion stands were a threat to my rights as a woman. The issue is much greater than Roe vs. Wade. The real issue is the continual deterioration of society into disunified chaos through such channels as poverty, racism, weakening of family and marriage bonds, lack of moral discrimination, hatred of self and lack of respect for human life that lead to so many unplanned pregnancies. These factors leading a woman to consider snuffing a life within her body are the issues. Every

life is a blessing from the Allah. My life was forever changed by the simple truth of submission to One creator (Islam). Simple Truths are the most powerful. It was all practical. A void had been filled that ideologies, political movements and religious, sects could not fill. There is only One God. The Truth cut through the facade of intellectual unreasoning, selfishly motivated denials and lies I had clung desperately to. If it is the Will of Allah I will continue to write and share what I learn as I Learn. It is important we actively strive to dispel misconceptions, for the misconceptions kept the wandering from Islam. Islam is not a terrorist society, but a broad community striving for peace, justice and human rights for all in the name of Allah. A brief look at this short existence. All existence in this world is brief and it is apparent my reconnection with Islam can not be attributed to anything or anyone. It is only because it is Allah's will for Allah simply says "Be" and it is. We prefer the term 'reconnection' to 'conversion' because all created things are created with a naturally submissive nature towards our Creator. It is only through the madness of this world that we get away from this, caught up in all the materialism and so forth. Through Islam we are at long last reconnecting with that nature we were born with.^[1]

Bahria Amanullah



^[1] Courtesy: *The Islamic Voice*

The Choicest find: Islam

I can thank none but God that now I am a Muslim. I am fully aware that it is difficult for my Christian friends to comprehend my decision. Why I reject the fiction that Jesus (may peace be upon him!) was Almighty God is the result of my long search for the truth about One God.

There is no time and space here to prove from the text of the gospels that the words of Jesus (may peace be upon him!) concerning the Oneness of God are a far cry from the language of the Trinitarians.

I tried to find the truth about the Oneness of God in Christianity but failed. However I tried to heed the words of Jesus (may peace be upon him!): Knock and the door will open. Seek and you will find ... (Mt, 7:7)

Islam reveals to me the correct concept of monotheism — that the Oneness of God is absolute. There is no mystery about this truth.

Jesus (may peace be upon him!) confirmed that, when asked of the greatest thing in faith: 'The most important one', answered Jesus is this: Hear, "O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." (Mk, 12:29)

I have not the slightest doubt that Jesus and Muhammad (may peace be upon them both) are servants of the same true God. No impartial examiner of truth can fail to recognize the unequivocal teachings of the two Prophets concerning the Oneness of Allah, the Most High.

The true conception of the Oneness of Allah, the Most High, is to me light from darkness and confusion ^[1]

^[1] Courtesy: *Yaqeen International* (Karachi-Pakistan) September 22, 1987, Page 119-120)

It is true that when one discovers true Islam it is most unthinkable to reject the Messenger. Islam distinguishes the truth about Allah's absolute Oneness.

The Islamic call was a faint one from the beginning, gradually growing stronger as I grew into my adulthood. At an early age the incredible trinity was a bitter pill to swallow with the logical $1+1+1+=3$.

During my high school years I was tempted with almost endless freedom. There was enough of it to revoke just about every moral code there was.

A Strange manner of worship became known to me. My teachers persuaded me to join Christian cultists but my heart said, No! Noise, temporal joys and emotional swerves were not my kind of baits. I was careful not to become a non Catholic because the non-Catholics were the 'heretics'. We learnt about the faults of the heretical churches but were never encouraged to discuss them openly.

Then I learnt that the 'heretics' do play the same game too but often better.

The cultist's manner of singing uncontrollably, shedding tears while strumming expensive guitars did not impress me. These Christians brag as if God would not test their faith, not to mention Satan. If Satan had the privilege to test Jesus (may peace be upon him!) then think what he can do with the meek soul of a common mortal. The cultists deceive themselves.

Catholics could not prove to me why I should not worship with the Protestants who are also Trinitarians.

During my undergraduate years the long accepted 'pagan' world opened to me with the availability of books on major non-Christian faiths. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam attracted me. During my readings it occurred to me that I was searching, for a religion that defines the absolute Oneness of God. The

former two faiths lost my favor because of their ambiguous definition of the Supreme Deity.

Islam's bold definition of the Supreme Deity attracted me strongly:

There is none worthy of worship save Allah, and Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is the Messenger of Allah.

The Bible contains many metaphorical statements the true meaning of which can only be grasped if Christendom can present the unadulterated text of the original Gospel of Jesus (may peace be upon him!). The failure to do so has sprouted numerous Bible versions. The Methodists would not read a Jehovas' Bible, the Jehovas' will not read the Anglican's and the Baptists will not read Duay and so on.

The high pressure Christian fundamentalism, which sprouted in the US in great numbers, acts to play down the great schism by calling themselves multi-denominational.

It seems Christianity ought to stress the literal interpretation of the Bible, but which version?

After deep thought I decided to pursue three questions:

1. Is Jesus God?

Jesus is not God. In the Bible Jesus taught that God is one. See Mark 12:29, John 17: 3, Mt 19:17, etc. Jesus (may peace be upon him!) prayed frequently, I ask, to whom did he submit, if he was God himself? If Jesus died. Did God die? No! The Holy Qur'an confirms that Jesus (may peace be upon him!) was man (*Surat. 5:19-75*).

2. Is God an individual?

God is absolutely One. See Mark 12:28-30, John 20:17, Mt. 19:16-17, etc. *Surat* (Chapter 112) of *Al-Ikhlās* of the Holy Qur'an defines the purity of Allah, the Most High:

Say, Allah is One. Allah is Absolute and eternal. He begets

not nor was He begotten. There is nothing like unto Him.

3. What is this Islam

It is a total way of life designed by Allah, the Most High, since creation but organized and perfected through the last Prophet. Today it is a living revolution commanding mankind to achieve all the good in this world and in the Hereafter. Everyday life must reflect worship of Allah, the Most High.

A Muslim means one who submits himself herself completely to Allah, the Most High. Christians must appreciate that Jesus (may peace be upon him!) submitted totally to the will of Allah, the Most High, thus he was a perfect Muslim.

Jesus (may peace be upon him!) heralded the coming of the Spirit of Truth, the long awaited 'Prophet like Moses'.

Jesus' gospel was a forward to the Holy Qur'an, the permanent revelation. Know this truth and the truth shall set you free.

Thus I have come to know and accept *Al-Islam* — the Straight Path.

Bar'rah Islam of (TalaseaNew Britain)



I was totally convinced by the Truth of Islam

Sister Bushra Finch was brought up as a Christian. There were many aspects which were not acceptable to her, particularly the idea of 'Trinity' and 'Crucifixion of Jesus'. She was impressed by the attitudes towards life and other people of some Muslim friends. She borrowed a copy of the Holy Qur'an from a library. After finishing reading of the of the 'Sacred Book' she was convinced

that she had found something important and meaningful and was embarrassed by her earlier prejudices towards Islam. She felt that she was totally wrong and ignorant from Islam. She studied more books in order to know about ablution, prayers and fasting and by the 'will of Allah, the Al-Mighty', she completed fasting of the whole month. Upon completing this, her joys knew no bounds. Within a week and with the help of a Muslim lady, she met an *Imam*, took the declaration of the 'Faith of Islam' and adopted new Muslim Name of Bushra. Hereunder is her conversion to Islam story:

"Bushra Finch was brought up as a Christian but found various aspects of the faith unacceptable, such as the crucifixion of Jesus. She was first introduced to Islam by a friend, but she stuck to her preconceived ideas as much of her knowledge was taken from media distortions of Islam.

Whilst searching for "something that made sense," Bushra discovered the holy Qur'an in her local library. She was amazed by its beauty and its clarity. She had finally found what she had been looking for and was totally convinced of the truth of Islam.

Bushara is now involved in spreading the message of Islam to others:

I was brought up as a Christian, much as most people in this country are. I was christened, studied Scripture at school, and never went to church except for the occasional wedding and even less frequently for the midnight mass service on Christmas Eve. Whilst I believed much of what I was taught, there were many aspects I found unacceptable, particularly the idea of the Trinity and the deification of Jesus. I did, however, believe in a 'Supreme Being', and that the universe had a creator, but I did not search any further to clarify these vague ideas.

I knew next to nothing about Islam and most of what I had picked up came from media representations of a stern and unforgiving God, fanatical followers, terrorists, subjugated women, and all the usual negative and untrue images.

How totally wrong and ignorant I was! However, a few months later, something positive from a Muslim friend of mine permeated my consciousness and influenced me. I was very much impressed by him as a person, his attitudes towards life and other people. I also remember how his face would light up from deep within, whenever he spoke about Islam.

I had been visiting the religious section of a local library in an attempt to find something that would make sense. I decided that I should consider Islam, if only to find out exactly what it was that I was dismissing. There was no shortage of books regarding Islam in the library, and so I borrowed a copy of the holy Qur'an and two other texts on Islam as well.

Much to my surprise, I found myself agreeing with what I was reading rather than arguing against it. By the time I had finished reading the Qur'an I was convinced that I had found something important and very meaningful, and was embarrassed by my earlier prejudices. Now that I had eventually found what I was looking for, the hard work was about to begin.

I found myself isolated, as my friends became unsupportive or could not understand. I knew no Muslim where I was now living, and consequently I was unsure of what I should do next.

However, Allah knows best, as I am the type of person who needs to find things out for myself. I decided to borrow more books from the library and taught myself how to do ablution for prayers and how to perform prayers. I fasted during the month of Ramadan, which I found hard at first but it did get easier, especially when I thought of all the Muslims throughout the world who were also fasting. Praise be to

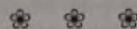
Allah, I had the strength to complete the month, and at the end of Ramadan I felt both exhilarated and very jubilant. In the weeks following Ramadan I began to feel a sense of confusion and anticlimax.

Where did I go from here? I really could not carry on alone and still I had not taken the declaration of Faith. As I was worrying about my next step, Allah provided me with the answer. I met a Muslim lady. When I explained to her what I was going through she was wonderful and arranged everything. Within a week, I met the *Imam*, took the declaration of Faith and adopted my new Muslim name. *Al-Hamdu Lillah*, I was now officially a Muslim!

The Prophet (may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said:

Whoever sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so then with his heart and that is the weakest of faith. (*An-Nawawi's 40 Ahadith*)^[1]

Bushra Finch



Our Daughter's Choice: Islam!

During one weekend home about one and a half years after their marriage, she broke the news to us: she had become Muslim. She made it clear that it was not because her husband had asked her to do it. She had chosen to be Muslim herself — *Editor*.

^[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Voice* (Monthly), May 1999, page 22

When our daughter married a young man from Iran, we had no idea what it meant to be Muslim. Although I am sure we had studied about it in church school class at some time.

It was comforting for us that he was Muslim because we were a religious family and assumed that, before long, he would convert to Christianity.

We were more concerned about the relations between Iran and America for this was the time of the hostage crisis, and they planned to later live in Iran.

They enrolled in a collage several hours away from us. Through telephone calls and occasional short visits we began to notice a change taking place in our daughter.

During one weekend home about one and a half years after their marriage, she broke the news to us; she had become Muslim. She made it clear that it was not because her husband had asked her to do it. She had chosen to be Muslim herself. She assured us that she was not rejecting us. She appreciated what we had given to her, but now she felt called to live out her life in this new path.

Our world fell apart, and we reacted with deep grief and loss. It has been twelve years since that thanksgiving weekend.

We have healed from the grief, rebuilt our relationship with our daughter and her husband, and have come to have deep respect for that which she has chosen. I have been impressed with all of her friends, both American converts and those from other countries who are Muslim.

What strong, disciplined, caring women. I wanted to know more about these women and to hear their stories.

A little over two years ago I started a project to survey American women in the United States and Canada who had become Muslim.

I distributed Questionnaires at Muslim conferences, advertised in Islamic Sisters International, and followed up on names suggested by those who filled out the questionnaire.

Of the three hundred questionnaires given out, fifty-three were returned by women from sixteen states and one province, all eager to tell their stories of the choice to be Muslim.

They reviewed their Christian backgrounds, explained how they learned to practice the Islamic way, described their role as wife, mother, student, and / or employee, and shared their feelings of the strength they have found in Islam.

They ranged from high school graduates to doctorates. At the time they responded (from September 1993 through July 1994), seven of the women were college students working toward a higher degree.

They were between twenty-one to forty-seven years of age. Many of them have been Muslim from six months to twenty-two years.

Approximately 40% of the women work outside the home either part-time or full-time, two women have their own in-home businesses, and 12 percent are working toward college degrees. One-half are full-time homemakers with 25 percent of those choosing to home school, their children of school age. Other school settings for the children included public schools, private schools, and Islamic schools.

Observing the common practices of Islam, all but two of the women in this survey are currently wearing *Hijab* full-time.

For the most part, all are involved in daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and participating in ongoing study regarding Islam.

The women have found fulfillment and happiness in their decision to live the Islamic lifestyle, by contrast to the more negative stories often heard in the media.

Ninety percent of the women in the study are married and reflect successful and happy marriages at the time of the survey. They indicate much satisfaction at the position they feel is theirs in the Islamic setting.

Some of those who are single as a result of divorce or never marrying indicate that they are uncomfortable at times in Muslim gatherings. They expressed the belief that marriage would give them a better position in the Muslim community.

They feel some loss of power, for it is through a husband that they would have connection and input into decisions made at the mosque, since being married is considered 'the natural state' in the Islamic community.

One assumption I had when I started my research was that women converted to Islam because they had married Muslims and felt pressure to convert. I found that several of the women converted while still single. These women investigated Islam as a result of taking a college course regarding Islam, visiting a Muslim country, having Muslim neighbors, interacting with another friend or student who was Muslim, (who may have later become the woman's husband).

Since their introduction to Islam, many of the women have married Muslims. Only one woman in the survey converted while married to a non-Muslim.

From this survey of the fifty-three women Muslim converts and my own story of reconciliation with my daughter in the years following her choosing Islam, I have written a book, *Daughters of Another path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam*.

The book was written for non-Muslims, especially families and acquaintances who are struggling with relationships and emotions that are shattered when a loved one chooses a path so different from parental or societal traditions.

Non-Muslims find the book enlightening and heartwarming. Muslims feel relief and gladness that their position as Muslim women is accepted and presented to the American public in a constructive and affirming manner.

As parents of an American Muslim convert, my husband and I now feel that the two paths are not so different.

Our daughter has embraced similar values as ours, she works hard at being a good mother and homemaker, she has a good education, and she has a willingness to extend herself in service to others. It has broadened our world to see it through the eyes of a daughter who has chosen another path.^[1]

Carol L. Anway



Islam is a blessing to Me

Islam is often linked with harsh, dogmatic laws in many people's minds, particularly for its female followers. Yet a 21-year-old Hong Kong woman, Chi Mei-fong, had few qualms about the strict diet and dress codes when she decided to convert to Islam eight years ago.

"All that is needed is a little adjustment in lifestyle just like taking up any other religion", She says. like many women of her age, she still dresses herself as other women dress when going out for the day. But unlike them, she always wears a *Hijab* (Islamic veil) to cover her long hair, and must make sure the upper part of her arms are covered. Each day she has to set aside time for five prayers, and she has had to change her name Now alongside Chi Mei-fong, her identity card bears her

[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Horizons*, September-October 1995 Pages 26-27

Islamic name, Hawra Khadeejah.

In Hong Kong the Muslim population has been enjoying a surge in recent years and many of the new local converts are women, a senior member of the Muslim community says.

Figures from the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong, a body which represents and owns the mosques and Muslim cemeteries in the territory, show there are now more than 65,000 Muslims here.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Khadeejah studies at a Christian school and had not even heard of the Qur'an before her first visit to a mosque. She was introduced to Islam by a Pakistani friend she met when working in a fast-food shop during a summer vacation. Khadeejah soon realized the religion answered her spiritual needs and, despite the stringent doctrines required by the Qur'an, decided to convert.

Khadeejah says she is fortunate that her work as an office manager in the Islamic Youth Association gives her the freedom to fulfill her religious obligations. "I have no problem in following Islamic customs but some of my friends are not so lucky. They may have difficulties in practising the rites when working in other companies," she says.

She has also had no problems with her family, who have accepted her new religion and its customs but so far have not shown any intention to follow suit. "I practiced not eating pork a year before my conversion," she says. "My parents are quite liberal and give me a lot of freedom in choosing my religion as long as it was not a cult.

But my mother did worry over my health and asked why Muslims always ask their believers to fast. She was finally persuaded when I told her it was a way to experience the sadness and hunger suffered by poor people," Khadeejah says.

"Initially, I was not allowed to pray at home because my

mother worships her ancestors. But as time went by, she just got used to my religious rituals."

On Islamic mode of dresses she says: "I realized how different I was from other people in the community when I discovered all the bewildered gazes came from locals, rather than Westerners. May be Hong Kong people are simply unfamiliar with Islamic Culture. I don't think I would attract such attention if I was an expatriate; an Arab or a Malay for example."

To some, a religious law which urges women to hide their body under heavy clothes to avoid being a temptation to men is oppressive. They argue that this victimises women by making them responsible for men's sexual arousal.

However, to Khadeejah, the dress code serves as a symbol of her spiritual life and she believes it's nothing more than a kind of protection.

"I do not see the custom as putting an onus on the women's side for male sexual needs," Khadeejah says. "For me, I wear the veil so that other people know I am a Muslim. It has more to do with my religious identity than anything else.

"I feel respected when others know my religious background. In a way, my outfit wards off unwanted harassment because men would think twice seeing how 'weirdly' I dress."

On the issue of polygamy, she said, "I think there is a delusion in many people's minds and they tend to take the words of the Qur'an at their face value." She explained that: "Although polygamy was allowed due to social needs, it was not encouraged. Mind you, it is very difficult to treat all you wives with equal justice as prescribed in the Qur'an."^[1]

Chi Mei-fong

[1] Courtesy: Saudi Gazette, 28th July 2000, page 7

Muslim prayers sing nothing but God's Mercy and Greatness!

When Mrs. Clara Williams was asked to give the reasons of her becoming a Muslim. She told:

"I was given a copy of *Islam and the Muslim Prayers*. Before I had read to page 18, I knew I had found a religion that would help me and satisfy me. Two things especially impressed me:

- 1 The Muslim belief in the inherent sinlessness of men.
- 2 That Muslim Prayers are not selfish.

As Christians we are taught to believe that we are born in sin and can only be saved by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that we are 'baptized' and later on 'confirmed.' I tried hard to believe all this but my commonsense refused. It was all childish and seemed an excuse to do as one liked and wriggle out of the consequences. The coward's way in fact!

I could not believe that the babies I saw were sinful and again I found that most of the so-called sins were just a breaking of community laws and not God's Laws at all. It was a great relief to find that under the teachings of the Qur'an nothing is in itself right or wrong but only the use or abuse of it.

Secondly, although the Muslim prayers puzzled me at first (for I could not understand them; something was missing it seemed) yet when I began to study them I realized they were all praise or very nearly so; they sing nothing but God's mercy and greatness, and I am sure that their constant recitation must foster a desire to be more Godlike in our daily lives. This contrast with the Christian prayer, which is a constant whine to be saved from the results of one's misdeeds or for things we

think we need.

We, as Christians, are taught God is a 'kind Father, Who is always listening to our prayers, ready to grant all we wish, if only we ask long and loud enough.

I, for one, always asked for all I wanted and I have had my prayers answered only to find I would have been happier had I left myself in God's hands. For my vision was short and the things I prayed for so constantly one day became a burden and chain around my neck a little later.

So these things alone decided me and I am glad. I feel I have left the child's state of religion and now through adult eyes see the Truth.

Every day I am learning to love the simplicity and justice of Islam and the wisdom of the Holy Qur'an.

The Bible seemed so full of useless matter and much that I thought horrible

Mrs. Clara Williams accepted Islam on the 21st June, 1940 and declared:

I, Mrs. Clara Williams of Muswell Hill, London, do hereby and solemnly declare of my own free will that I worship One and Only Allah (God) alone, that I believe Muhammad to be His Messenger and Servant; that I respect equally all Prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others and that I will live a Muslim life by the help of Allah. *La ilaha illallah Muhammadur Rasul Allah*

(There is, but One God (Allah) and Muhammad is God's Messenger).⁽¹⁾

Carol L. Anway

⁽¹⁾ *The Islamic Review*, Vol. xxviii, No. 11, Shawwal 1359 A.H./November 1940 A.C., pages 401 and 440

Journey to Faith!

This is a purely personal story of sister Emily B. Assami's 'reversion to Islam'. Before entering the fold of Islam, she thought over and over again on the following Verse of the Noble Qur'an:

We shall show them Our Signs in the horizons and within themselves, until it becomes evident to them that it is the Truth. (Surah Fussilat, 41:53)

Because this sacred Verse had raised within her the hope and aspiration that a time might come when she would see the 'Signs' as the believer sees them and that the many doubts in her heart would be erased... Even though Islam entered her heart, she could not fully appreciate the value of the 'Signs of Truth'. Indeed she had been led to Islam by the Grace of God:

"We have certainly guided him to the way, be he thankful or denying". (Surat Dahr: 76:3)

She read *The Origin of Species* by Darwin. It separated men of science from men of religion because it made Biblical version of creation outdated. She was always seeking after Truth but her father did not believe in God. She believed that the Old Testament consisted of fairy tales. She wished she had God who could talk to her and guide her like the Prophets had:

But her father was of the opinion that 'We have no records, except a few remains of early scriptures, the meaning gone, their wisdom lost through countless years and numerous translations.'

Her history teacher was so biased against Islam that he always talked ill about it. He lectured on comparative religions: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Islam — he pictured it as

a decline from the peak of Christian teachings into a collection of rituals which led to the stagnation of Muslim people. While singling out Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) he said:

He was an imposter who deceived his people and led them into wars.

Whereas she said that the Holy Prophet was sincere and really believed that God had sent him a revelation like earlier Prophets. She believed that God is the Creator of the Universe. She told that among the 'Children of Israel' there were those who spoke of God. But they denied Jesus who claimed Prophethood after them and when Prophet Muhammad claimed it later the Christians, likewise, denied his Prophethood. She is of the opinion that it would be fairer to accept them all or reject them all. She had to make a choice not only faith alone but by assertion. In this way, she would have been better guided.

She wanted to study about Prophet Muhammad and what he said about God and her opinion was if she could find it irrational, as she expected, she would abandon this subject once and for all. She asked her father whether he had read anything about Prophet Muhammad and Islam. He replied in the affirmative and told her that from the school library he searched for a book about Prophet Muhammad by a Muslim author, but could not find any except those written by Western Orientalists. He told her that he would have preferred any biography written by a Muslim, but strange enough, he could not get any. The Western Orientalists, out of jealousy and hatred say that (God forbid) the 'Prophet Muhammad suffered from epilepsy'. But it is based on totally wrong notions.

Emily B. Assami wrote a book entitled *Transition from doubt to assurance* which was first published in 1982 by Darul Fikr Damascus, Syria. In this book she has given details of her

entering the fold of Islam:

Here are some extracts:

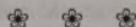
"The Qur'an explained it. Muhammad gave me an English translation. I was surprised how much it resembles the Jewish and Christian scriptures. It speaks of the same God. And it is evident that their Prophet Muhammad believed in that God, and in his message to the People.. The Qur'an is the holy book of Islam."

I started to read the translation of the Qur'an from the very beginning. I found there were many things, I didn't understand, but others impressed me. So I decided to continue my reading since I was unable to sleep anyway, in order to keep from thinking too much I began reading although my heart was not really in it, and suddenly before me were these words:

"And give glad tidings to the patient, who say when misfortune strikes: To God do we belong, and to Him is our return..."

And I felt better than, somehow.

Emily B. Assami



Fatima discovers the true spirit of Islam

The wife of General Muhammad Amin Ruzii, the first Saudi paratrooper, again shares with us her experiences, living in Saudi Arabia during the past 42 years. She hopes that her story may give some insight to the hardships people faced many years ago and trust it will give some perspective to the seeming trials and tribulations faced by newcomers to the kingdom.

The year was 1957 and Fatima and her family were living in Jeddah. Her husband was very busy training paratroopers and one day there was a demonstration for the families. Fatima remembers it vividly. The families of the officers had come with picnic lunches and children were scurrying about.

When the plane flew overhead and the paratroopers began jumping out some of the women began screaming and a few fainted. She chuckles as she recalls how unprepared the women were. They were transferred to Tabuk for three years. She says it is remarkable what has happened to Tabuk over the years as it was a small village with one street and one never saw women in the shops. Tabuk is quite a metropolis now and she loves visiting there.

While back in Jeddah they went to Makkah one day to find the Kaabah area flooded after heavy rains. The pictures she shares are quite valuable in that so much about the area has changed since then. She related some of her experiences of *Hajj* saying that one had to take all provisions for the *Hajj* period. No one had ever motivated Fatima to be a practising Muslim but she found that it came naturally to her.

As she looked out from the door of her tent at Mina she saw the pilgrims going by all dressed the same when someone pointed out to her, the President of one of the African nations. There was

nothing to differentiate him from anyone else. Rich and poor were the same. This she found to be the true spirit of Islam.

Every one was asking forgiveness and obeying the one true God. She began to question how she should serve and know God who had given her life and fulfilled her by making her a wife and a mother.

Through the years, Fatima, had moved around the Kingdom quite a bit with her family. They lived overseas for some time but she felt her heart was in Saudi Arabia. She readily admits that if her husband had told her exactly what living here would be like, it would have made it easier for her. She says at times she felt like pinching herself to make sure it was real.

She had learned to pray from a Palestinian girl, who had the habit of wearing shin-length dresses and prayer scarf.

Fatima mimicked her for many years until one night in a dream, a man in a white robe came to her, he was faceless but tapped her shins with a stick. When she awoke and recalled her dream she realized he was correcting her prayer garb.

She herself was uninformed about Islam. She went for *Hajj* and fasted in Ramadan and celebrated *Eid* with her family but without any knowledge for doing so. She reflects about it now saying that Islam to her was like a ripened fruit but with no taste. Her faith in God was always unshakable and she knew that whatever would be, would be.

Fatima has noticed many changes over the years, some good and others not. She says people were very different in those days in that they used to help each other. If someone moved into a new neighborhood, the neighbors would come to help clean and arrange the house. If someone died neighbors would come with food and assist in all areas. Now it is quite different and people are very distant from each other. Some times one doesn't even know the names of one's neighbors. She thinks

that money has had a negative effect on most people.

One day a high fever had made her visit a couple of doctors who could not agree on the problem. Her husband was due to leave for Cairo for some time and suggested she go along. She packed her bags and took her children to their new lodging in Cairo. She saw a surgeon there who told her that her appendix should be removed immediately. She went home in tears as there was no one to care for her children if she was in hospital.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and she found a friend from Jeddah standing there. When the women saw her distressed she offered her to take the children so she could have her surgery.

As it turned out, the woman's home was across the street from the hospital and she ended up seeing her children everyday until she was discharged. Fatima readily admits that if one has faith in God and good intentions, He always provides a way.

Fatima came to Saudi Arabia when she was 16 years old and did not go home for another sixteen years. When she finally saw her family again she was saddened. She became used to the greetings of the people here. If people missed each other for a few days they would embrace and plant many kisses on each cheek. They are so genuinely warm in their greetings.

When she was with her own family they kept their distance and said. In the typical American fashion "hi" She felt hurt that they did not seem glad to see her and just looked at everyone in amazement.

There was her husband too, looking at them, looking at her and back at them again. He was waiting for the big greeting but it never came! She spoke to her sisters about Islam and completely alienated them.

It's a funny thing about becoming Muslim and living in a Muslim culture. Without making a conscious effort it changes

your thinking and your basic attitudes in that you find it difficult to identify with the people you grew up with.

They left her very angrily after she Questioned them about their belief that Jesus was God. "Say: with Allah is the argument that reaching home; if it had been His will, he could indeed have guided you all". (*Surat. Al-An'am* 6:149)

The last time she saw them was in 1979. Out of nine brothers and sisters she has one brother and one sister who have converted to Islam.

Her interest in Islam became intense only five years ago. She had weekly meetings at her house attended by new Muslims and those with Saudi husbands. Her intention was to help those newly arrived adjust and learn about the new religion and culture. It became her motivation to be a practicing Muslim and today she is devout.

She attends Qur'an memorization classes and has learned to recite Qur'an with *Tajweed*. Her husband is retired and her children are grown up and married and she spends her free time increasing her knowledge of Islam. She vehemently defends her search for the truth in Islam and is admired by many in the community for her knowledge and application of Islamic tenets in many daily personal situations.

She is awestruck when she talks about the progress she has seen in Saudi Arabia.

Through the assiduous work and planning by the Saudi government over these years, and their intense interest in the propagation of Islam, they have her deepest gratitude.

Saudi Arabia is a country she is proud to be a citizen of.^[1]

N. Hashim

^[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Voice* (Bangalore, India) Monthly, Vol.11:3, No.122, March 1997, page 17.

Why I embraced Islam^[1]

Shortly after I was born in 1934, it became a 'fashion' in Germany to quit membership of the Church — Catholic or Protestant and became '*gottgläubig*' which means believing in God but actually signifies rather the contrary. In fact when I was about seven years old an elder girl told me that there was no God at all and as she seemed to me quite an authentic person and I had just learned that also Santa Claus is only an invention for children, turned all my interest towards this world.

Yet the world at that time was far from being easily understandable for young people. There were bombs day after day, there was father who could come only now and then for just one day and mother who knitted gloves and socks for "our poor soldiers." there was a big house in the neighborhood which was turned into a hospital for the wounded. When the war was over there were strange people who took away our house and American war-films started coming in which melted my heart. I was unable to judge who was right and who was wrong and everything looked cruel and senseless to me — there were a thousand whys to which nobody could give a satisfactory answer. I started to be on the outlook for God, yet hard though I tried I could neither find Him in Catholicism nor Protestantism nor with Jehova's witnessess. The road nearer to God in these religions was barred for me through the fact that all of them had doctrines in which to believe I found impossible and injunctions to follow which strictly seemed to me impracticable. And how could I accept a faith in which I knew from the very outset that I would be tortured by self-accusation for my own imperfection?

^[1] Courtesy: *Yekeen international*, February 7, 1992 pages 200-201

It is still a miracle for me that of all girls I was the one to meet a young European who had already embraced Islam seven years before. The very first time we met I happened to inquire about his religion and when I learned that it was Islam I asked him to tell me more about it. I was a great sceptic at the time due to the disappointments I had with other religions, yet when he explained to me the meaning of the word Muslim i.e. one who out of free will surrenders himself to God's Commandments, something started waking up within me. Then he went on to explain to me that all men, animals, plants and everything else in this universe is already Muslim compulsorily because they would destroy themselves if they would not follow God's laws in matters such as eating, drinking, procreation and so on. Man alone, so he said, is in a position to accept Islam also spiritually apart from the material sphere where he practically does not have a free choice but has to follow his in born urges as animals and plants.

It was the wonderful logic, the pure commonsense in all Islamic teachings which attracted me so much in the first few fundamental doctrines about which I learned as much as in the books I read in the following years, small though the stock of unbiased Islamic literature in German language is. Apart from the help of the young Muslim he now is my husband who never got tired of explaining things to me and answering all my questions, Muhammad Asad's book *The Road to Makkah* made me understand the deep meaning behind all Islamic Injunctions, and thus helped me most while I was on my way to become a *Muslima*.

While already *Muslima* in my heart I decided that I would try out first whether I would be able to follow the laws of Islam and so I kept fast the most difficult duty as it seemed to me then, in Ramadan 1959. And this taught me that if we do a thing for the love of God it is no longer as fastidious to cope with as it first seems.

After this it was only a matter of time till my husband and I had saved enough money for our emigration in a Muslim country as we saw that it is next to impossible to practice Islam in the West while one is not independent financially. My husband would have lost his job immediately had he asked for example for 15 minutes leave to offer his *Zuhr* Prayers or had we tried to observe *Purdah*, my husband in the office with his three lady secretaries and I in a society where only nuns completely cover their bodies.

After a series of unsuccessful attempts it was Pakistan where my husband was offered a suitable position and where we found our new home amongst brothers and sisters in Faith.

I used to enjoy all freedom the West offers to women free discussions with men as well as women, parties, cinemas, dancing, concert theatre, swimming, skitting, shopping, holidays and driving my own car. Apart from this I have left behind my mother, father, sister and brothers to all of whom I feel strongly attached. Yet the peace of mind I have found since I am trying to be a good *Muslima* not only of the tongue but also of the heart and in practice is an ample compensation for what I have given up. It is a peace which I never hoped to find while still a Westerner with unavoidably materialistic outlook on life.

The reason why I tell this is that I so much want to make, especially my young sisters and brothers understand that all the tempting glitter of Materialism is just nothing when compared with the previous gift that God bestows on those whom He makes Muslims. May they be strong enough to reject the *talma* (falsehood).⁽¹⁾

Fatima Heeren (West Germany)

⁽¹⁾ Courtesy: *Qur'anulhuda*

Islam: Our Choice

Faima Martin was born in Austria as Alexandra Krickler, and raised as a Roman Catholic. She Studied Arabic And Islamic Studies at Vienna University, where she was presented with the typically misinformed orientalist view of Islam; i.e. that Prophet Muhammad took a bit from Judaism and combined it with aspects of Christianity to make up his book, and in the process he occasionally made mistakes such as those regarding the Prophet Jesus.

However, as a result of her studies she went to Egypt and Sudan where the errors of these misconceived opinions were made clearly apparent. She felt very at home and comfortable in these Muslim countries due to their religious environments and the prevalence of the Islamic ethos. Despite academic success, after completing her course her life felt totally disorganized and she describes herself as being completely lost and confused. She endured a period of internal struggle in which the idea of actually changing; herself to such a degree that she might be able to follow Islam seemed too far away even to contemplate. Eventually, she realized that it was not that she had first to change to become a Muslim, but instead that she would have to surrender to Allah, who would help, support, and guide her to change. Sister Fatima believes that her conversion was due to God moving her heart.

She is now married with three Children, teaches Arabic, and also runs a small export company with her husband.

I was born into a Roman Catholic family in Austria. Although my mother was a firm believer, my father was an atheist and

did not have much respect towards religion.

From a very young age my mother told me about God and I developed a deep love for Him. I remember how as a child I found it very difficult to accept the crucifixion of Jesus, and how I had once told a Priest teaching me at school that this story was untrue.

Growing up I turned into a rebel. My parents had little control over me and were unable to provide me with guidance. At the age of fifteen I traveled on my own to Turkey and this was my first contact with an Islamic culture. I loved the Blue Mosque in Istanbul and I spent hours there just relaxing, thinking and watching others. I found a sense of tranquillity in the mosques that I had never found in a church.

I still had a deep love of God and an affection towards religion, but I was unable to follow the law He had established because I was deeply unhappy and lost, both spiritually and emotionally.

The only thing that kept me going were my studies. I believe that God had given me the ability to learn very easily so that despite my personal problem and my leaving home I managed to continue with my studies successfully.

After completing my A-Levels I decided to continue with my education and start University. I had no idea of what I wanted to study, and I can remember sitting in a cafeteria and looking at various prospectuses whilst trying to decide which degree I should study. I believe that God helped me and moved me towards choosing Social Anthropology and Arabic.

During my studies I received grants which allowed me to go abroad; twice to Egypt and once to Sudan, where I collected data for my Ph.D. thesis about the colloquial Arabic of Khartoum and Omdurman.

During these stays in Muslim countries I felt very much at home. I loved the way people cared about other people even in

busy and crowded places like Cairo. I loved the mosques and developed a similar affection towards the people of these countries, and at the same time I felt both very close to Islam, and yet very far removed. I was longing to become at peace with myself and give up the bad habits I had picked up whilst growing up in Austria.

In my head I thought that I could only become a Muslim once I had changed for the better, and I never stopped to think that only Islam would be able to help me to change.

After finishing my Ph.D. thesis I left Vienna for good, having spent much of my time abroad anyway, and I went to Sudan where I hoped I would be able to spend time reflecting upon the emotional and spiritual problems I had encountered in my life, and where I could further contemplate the feasibility of my converting to Islam, which by now I felt held the best solutions to my worries and confusion within my life.

After some time in Sudan, I believe that God called me. I heard a voice inside me telling me to go to Jerusalem. Obviously was somewhat afraid, but nevertheless I took the train to Cairo from where I got a bus to Jerusalem. During the journey, I learnt of a man living on the Mount of Olives, and I decided that I must go and speak with this person. When finally I did get there, it was the turning point in my life, as I surrendered immediately and became a Muslim.

After three months I went back home to my parents who were not exactly delighted by my change but did not put too many obstacles in front of me either. The most difficult thing was to meet old friends who found it almost impossible to believe that I had changed. This made things somewhat awkward and sad, and so eight months later I returned to Jerusalem where I started teaching German at a Palestinian girl's school.

After about another year, I married an English Muslim convert, and came to England with him and we have since been given

three lovely children by Allah, the Most Gracious.

For me the power of Islam lies in the Qur'an and the example of the Noble Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!). What convinced me was not a dogma or a set of facts but the sheer power Islam had to turn my life around, to find that place inside me that wanted to be special for God only.

An old myth about Islam is that it takes the freedom away from women. "What freedom?", I ask. In my so-called free days I was dependent on so many things, from cigarettes to drugs to the attention of men. Only now do I feel truly free and respected, dependent only on God, and He is the best of friends.

In no longer have any desire to do things which are not pleasing to Allah, and I am no longer as impatient with life. I do not ever have the slightest desire to break the laws of Allah and indulge in things forbidden. Observing the laws given by Allah finally gives the human being the freedom to go deeper and discover the worlds within the human being rather than fleeting pleasures on the outside without Allah.

Anyone who is hearing Allah's call within but is afraid of following it because of family or friends or work or any similar fears, I would like to say that the worst thing you can do is try to convince other people about Islam, as it just shows them that you are not sure yourself and it makes a problem between you and others because people do not want to hear about God or religion if their hearts are closed. If they ask you, tell them about it, but never indulge in preaching to the ones who do not wish to hear.

Try to find Muslim brothers and sisters for giving you strength and be prepared to lose some old friends on the way, as not everyone will be able to accept your change.

At first things may seem difficult and you may not be sure

what you will gain from surrendering to Allah but let me tell you that there is no true life for any human being unless he accepts his dependence on Allah and surrenders to His will so that his life becomes devoted to Allah.

A man asked the Messenger of Allah, (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him): "Do you think that if I perform the obligatory prayers, fast in Ramadhan, treat as lawful that which is lawful, and treat as forbidden that which is forbidden, and do nothing further, I shall enter Paradise?" He said: "Yes". (An-Nawawi's 40 Hadith).^[1]

Fatima Martin



My Transformation to Islam

By the grace of Allah, six months have passed since I made *Shahada*. Reflecting on what had changed in my life in these days, I notice "the change of consciousness". Before embracing Islam, the criteria of my life had been myself in every aspect. However, one day, I realized the danger of human criteria, which means that people may have different criteria of good or bad, or right or wrong if freedom of choice is given to each person.

Once I came across Islam and studied it, I came to know that Allah exists in the center of my life. Keeping the Qur'an, the Words of Allah as the principles of my life, constantly being conscious of Allah, and concerning my self always whether I follow the right path of Allah these efforts have greatly changed my consciousness.

^[1] Courtesy: *The Muslim World League Journal* January-February 1999 / Shawwal 1419. Vol. 26, No. 10, pages 23-24

Next to the change of consciousness, I experienced "the change of view", that "how to see" matters. Afterwards I remained always aware of Allah. He taught me many things which I had never noticed, *Alhamdulillah*. What is true happiness? What is true richness? What is true kindness? What is true strength? In the past I had thought religion as some thing vague without any clear answer. Nevertheless, I realized Islam provides me answers in the Qur'an like solving a formula of mathematics. Allah has opened the closed eyes of my heart, *Alhamdulillah*.

Change of Behaviour:

Recently, I joined a free market as a volunteer, in order to sell goods which were made in Nepal, to support Nepalese orphans. One of the volunteer staff sold goods while telling lies to the customers to draw their attention. I told him, "It is not good to tell a lie." He replied: "You can tell a lie as far as you do not hurt people." What shall I learn from this experience? What made me different from this staff? At first, the difference of the criteria is to judge what is good or bad, and the second difference is purpose. If a purpose is different its method must be necessarily different. We Muslims can learn from the Qur'an, which describes what's good and bad, *Alhamdulillah*. The purpose is to love Allah, to seek help to please Him. I believe that the knowledge of Islam is enough to realize this aim. This is "the change of behavior", along with the change of view. In the 40 Hadith, the first words of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) is:

An action is judged only by its intention, and the importance is the intention of people."

This is the lesson which I have learned from the experience as a volunteer who is engaged in uplifting orphans in Nepal. I confirm that we should always be aware of Allah and behave ourselves righteously.

I believe that Allah gives us a chance to decide, how to behave. I

notice there are several types of people who have no shelter. People who have a work but no job or those who have food but no house of their own. A person may be hungry to rummage through a garbage can. We do not need to give a sleeping bag to a person who has it. What I have learned from "almsgiving" is that how important knowledge is not only for alms-giving but also for many aspects in Islam:

"We have indeed created man in the best of moulds."
(*Surat, At-Tin* 95:4)

We have to use all our abilities to see, to hear and to feel from our heart in order to behave in the right way.

One day I was told by a convert Japanese *Muslima* that she could not yet grasp the Faith, since she was not a native Muslim. I can understand her feeling, very well. Though six months have passed since I made *Shahadah*, frankly speaking, I could only recently feel the existence of Allah from the bottom of my heart. I cannot read the Qur'an in Arabic and I am doing my best every day in order to find what I should study in Islam.

True Richness:

While staying in Nepal, I started thinking what true richness is. Richness is not that we have a lot of money or materialistic prosperity. *Alhamdulillah* I met Islam. The encounter with Islam did not change all of my life at once. Most of the Japanese people know that we cannot buy happiness with money. Nevertheless, we feel unsafe without money and many people follow a materialistic life. When I met Islam, being much away from *Fitra* which was given in the name of Allah, my heart was tightly closed like a stone. Everything started with the assumption, "if there is Allah", I had many questions and looked for answers in the Qur'an which is *Kalamullah*. What is Allah? Why do we exist in this life? For what sake do we live and where do we go? What is Faith?

I could find all the answers in the Qur'an. I am neither a native Muslim nor have I traveled to any Arab country. I did not have other ways to find answers except the Qur'an and to confirm that there is no contradiction in Islam. While my knowledge about Islam is almost equal to zero, I cannot help thanking Allah that He has guided me till now.

Allah's Love:

Even though I did not know Islam, I did many wrong things in the past. Since I felt I was not unhappy, I thought everything all right and I never thought I had to pray or ask forgiveness of anyone. Now I realize I had been in a very unhappy situation without salvation. My friend told me that my soul was saved after I met Islam. I can understand its meaning. I believe that my encounter with Islam is a token of Allah's love for me and that He has given me a chance to live as a *Muslima*. *Alhamdulillah*.

When you feel week, we Muslims are strengthened by the Qur'an and Muslim brothers and sisters, *Alhamdulillah*. I would like to declare to my friends, "I agree with the rightness in the road of Allah. *In Sha Allah*."

I am scared to deny Allah because it would deny everything including myself. I am here to exist in this world. I was created by Allah And Will return to Allah. Allah teaches me what I am. I will soon return to Allah. I wish to meet Allah straight without shame. I believe we are made to live in this world to meet Allah in the Hereafter with all the *Khair*, *In Sha Allah*.^[1]

Fitra (Osaka Muslim Union, Osaka, Japan)

[1] The above mentioned article has been reproduced with the courtesy of *Da'wah Highlights* Islamabad, Vol. x, No. 11, pp. 41-44 and *Islamic Future*, February 1999. It was also published in *Islamic Voice*, November 1998, page 22 and *Riyadh Daily*, 9th April, 1999, page 8

Suddenly I felt safer on the street!

My first in-depth encounter with Islam came about when I met Muhammad, a fellow student at the University of Swansea. He had arrived in Britain one year earlier from war-torn Lebanon. Despite a strong (Anglican) Christian background and a secure Faith in God, I had unresolved questions of Faith, to which Muhammad's religion seemed to have the answers. I'd never understood about the trinity, for instance. Then when Muhammad said there are no partners with God, it just seemed very pure and beautiful to have a religion which puts Him alone.

Islam corresponded with everything I had always felt deep down inside, even when I was a child, that Jesus (peace be upon him!) was a wonderful Prophet with a wonderful message of forgiveness, but he was not to be worshipped as God. I was searching for spiritual clarity, but I didn't realize I would find it classified under Islam.

The more I learned about Islam, the more right it seemed to me. But conversion was not easy step to take. I was intensely longing to do it but I didn't know if I had the courage. I was afraid of what my family would think, the culture difference, my role change in society.

Then one night as I was talking to Muhammad about Islam, I had a feeling of having found my right place in the universe. Now was the time to stop holding back and to follow my instincts. On impulse, I recited the *Kalima* (There is only one God, and Muhammad (may the peace and blessing of Allah be upon him!) is His messenger," to my then fiancé. I said this before him from my heart. I had always believed the first part. Now on that special night I had the courage to say the second

part. When I woke up the next morning, I knew I had taken the right step. I felt relieved, I had freed myself.

I was well aware of the risk I was taking. Islam is a massive subject - supposing I discovered something I didn't believe in — but the more I learned, the more I felt it was everything I wanted to believe in.

Marriage to a Muslim was not the reason for my conversion, but had to do with an internal process. Looking back, there were intimations of this process. Since childhood I had visited Lebanon and Egypt with my family. For a reason I can't explain, I felt at home there. It hurt every time I had to leave.

Muhammad and I moved to Loughborough so that he could continue his studies. There we made contact with the Muslim community. For the first time I was exposed to the practices of devout followers. It gave me a desire to adhere more strictly to the laws enshrined in the Qur'an. I welcomed its disciplines, such as praying five times a day: at first light, noon, the first shadow, twilight and night. In a technological age it keeps you in tune with nature: it's like meditation, your mind is redirected.

I also welcomed the Islamic rule of separating the sexes. It leads to a much more peaceful life. The wives are more relaxed because they know their husbands are not going to be tempted by other women. People think we don't trust our wives or husbands, but as Almighty Allah created us as human beings capable of giving in to temptation, so He has also given us this rule as a precaution.

That precaution gives women an enormous sense of well-being when they are together. There is no tension, no showing off to the opposite sex. They can enjoy each other's beauty without feeling threatened by it.

When I go out, I cover myself with the traditional head scarf

and long coat. It was hard at first. I was brought up in a Western society wanting to be attractive. Then vanity started to drop away from me and I became a little purer. I was glad! Suddenly I felt safer on the streets and I felt happy that men wouldn't whistle at me or have personal thoughts about my body. I was no longer just an object; Islam has given me my dignity as a woman.^[1]

Georgina Noueiri



How farcical could be Media Images

A staff writer of *Islamic Voice* talked to Mohammad Karim Ghazi and Hina Ghazi Begum at their Delhi residence to enquire about their views on Islam, their conversion, and the Supreme Court judgement. Here is the account of their narration.

Media images could be unreal, often farcical. Last May when the Supreme Court advised the Union Government to formulate Uniform Civil Code, more concerned amongst us muttered curses over those who desert their religion for no other reason than marriage. The case had revolved round four male converts who had taken new Muslim spouses after joining the fold of Islam. Media had painted them in dark colors dubbing their conversion to be a shield for opportunists providing the easy escape route out of responsible matrimonial life. And for the communalists, the rather "liberal provisions" constituted a constant incentive for conversions. The communal politician had discovered a Godsend in the

^[1] Courtesy: *Saudi Gazette* (Riyadh, K.S.A.) *The Message*, Friday, April 12, 1996, page 7. — Editor.

verdict. The intellectual Muslim was simply fearful of the communal fallout. The Media had lapped it all, choosing to keep the entire background of the case concealed from the public knowledge and thus helping the communalists rope the verdict into the service of its partisan electoral strategy.

They found no way but to come out of their ancestral faith to dissolve an estranged marriage and to relive the life. One among such couples is Mohammad Karim Ghazi, formerly Gian Chand.

Mohd. Karim Ghazi and Mrs. Hina Ghazi: smile of satisfaction

Ghosh and his wife Hina Ghazi Hina was Vanitha Gupta till 1987.

The press and the other media had targeted them as spouse deserters, unscrupulous individuals who feel no qualms in renouncing the faith for the sake of taking a new spouse. Far from being apologetic, Ghazi has sought a revision of the Supreme Court judgement asserting that the retrospective application of the law would have grave implications.

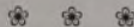
Born and brought up in Bangalore, Karim Ghazi is a suave professional running a firm dealing in construction equipment. Engineering (UVCE) in Bangalore in 1976 and later graduated from the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in the same city. To cap them all he took a management degree from Huxley College, London. An atheist by birth Ghosh had felt culturally closer to Islam, amid his Muslim friends in Bangalore since his childhood. The element of scientific inquiry in him kindled an urge to find the truth behind the religion. It was during his studies at London that he studied Islam and interacted with numerous scholars. However conversion came much later at Delhi after his first marriage in 1984 to an influence business woman. According to him the marriage remained unconsummated in the hope that the other partner

too would join him to adopt the new Faith, Islam. It was in 1987 that Karim embraced Islam. All hell broke loose and Sushmitha Ghosh unleashed a vengeful campaign. He was taken to the Court through the Crime Against Women Cell (CAWC) of the Delhi Police.

"Lust was not Behind My Conversion to Islam"

I do not hold a brief for other three converts. But for myself it is plain and well known that the first marriage (with Sushmita) had remained unconsummated only because of incompatibility of our religious beliefs. In such a situation no aspersion need be cast on my conversion. I married Hind Begum, herself a convert and deserted wife of an irresponsible Hindu husband, in 1992. Could this be attributed to lust? If at all lust was involved, why should I marry a mother of two children? Moreover the Supreme court judgement is flawed in directing me to be tried for bigamy, an act which was not an offence when it was done. My Counsel R.K. Jain and Meeankshi Arora had filed a review petition saying that the court's judgement was violative of Article 20 (1), 21, 22, and 25 of the Constitution. The religion and nothing else could curb his right.

Md. Karim Ghazi
(formerly Gain Chand Ghosh)



I have found Dignity for Women in Islam

I was born in a *Bania* family of Agra. My father was an IAS officer. I studied at a convent school and went upto M.A. degree. We had a lot of Muslim friends. I was first married in 1982 and was deserted by the Hindu husband merely for the 'Crime' of bearing him two daughters. Besides I was constantly harassed for dowry. It was not a happy marriage and my parents too were struck with grief. My husband disappeared and his whereabouts could not be known. I was completely broken as there was none to support the family. It is next to impossible to extract maintenance under the Hindu law. We tried to find the whereabouts of my husband but there was no response to notices in newspaper. This led to legal dissolution of my marriage. Meanwhile the Muslim families in our contact helped us tide over the crisis. I was impressed by the way the girls were tended in Muslim families. I embraced Islam in 1987. It was through them that my marriage with Mr. Karim Ghazi was arranged. I have found solace and dignity in Islam. I have a son from Ghazi. He is also looking after my two daughters from the earlier marriage. My family is happy with my current status. My mother-in-law has also embraced Islam.

I have studied Islam and observed Muslims from close quarters. Muslims are lively people and they enjoy a high degree of social communion. We receive threatening calls from fanatic elements but we have the faith that the Almighty Allah is the greatest protector.^[1]

Hina Begum Ghazi, formerly Vinitha Gupta



^[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Voice* (Bangalore, India) September 1995, page 5.

Islam: Our Choice

Huda Khattab was born Samantha Scott, and grew up in a Protestant family in the North of England. She attended Sunday school as a child, and went through an intensely religious period during her early teens, when she was attending an "evangelical" Church. From the age of about sixteen, she began to question certain central teachings of the Church, but found no satisfactory answers. A couple of years later, she went to study Arabic at a University, a choice of subject which stemmed from an interest in the Middle East, and also a desire to "do something different." Her studies brought her into close contact with Muslims for the first time, and she was greatly impressed with what she discovered.

What began as an intellectual pursuit developed into a personal and spiritual quest, culminating in her embracing Islam. She was particularly impressed by the discipline and moral code of Islam, the warmth of family life, the Muslim lady's dress code, and also the superiority of the Glorious Qur'an's claim to be the Word of God over that of the Bible. Since converting to Islam, she has completed her studies, written two books and numerous articles on Islam, and was for five years Editor of *Usra-The Muslim Family Magazine*. Sister Huda is married and has a young family.

I grew up in an average, not particularly religious, Protestant family. My father wasn't interested in religion at all, but my mother made sure we all went to Sunday School and got a grounding in Christian teachings.

I always believed in God from childhood, and went through an intensely religious adolescence, attending the local Pentecostal church at every opportunity; this deepened my belief in God,

and as I took their teachings very much to heart, I was not attracted by the antics that many of my peers got up to: such as smoking, drinking, drugs and boyfriends.

Whilst I never objected to the moral teachings of the church I attended, I did begin to question the doctrines of this church and I became confused. Long before I heard of Ahmed Deedat, the question of the sign of Jonah bothered me. If the Messiah was supposed to remain in the belly of the earth for three days and three nights, and the Bible's account described Christ's death as occurring late on Friday afternoon and his resurrection early on Sunday morning, then something was amiss.

That added up to two whole nights and one whole day, nothing like three days and three nights. So why did the whole of Christendom observe the Good Friday Easter Sunday period which so blatantly did not add up? The events of the Easter story are central to the theology of the church I attended, according to their teachings. If this story didn't make sense, then how could the rest of it be true?

This was just one of many doubts in my mind. The elders of the church could not answer them, and told me that I should have faith. I could not accept that: the central doctrine had collapsed under closer scrutiny. What else could be built on so flimsy a foundation?

Around this time, I left home to study Arabic in London. I enjoyed languages, but wanted to "do something different". I had some interest in the Middle East, and regarded Arabic, as an important world language because of trade, oil and politics. I had also heard a lot of pro-Zionist views in the church I had been attending, and thought that by studying Arabic I might get to hear the other side of that particular story, which I certainly did.

The language fascinated me, although it was quite difficult, as I was on an intensive course, which meant we covered the entire alphabet in the first lesson, and had to learn the whole lot for

homework, ready to start reading words, learning vocabulary and grammar on day two. Naturally enough, we learnt about Islam as background to the language studies, although I later had to re-learn all the early history we had been taught, as it came from the Orientalist viewpoint. One of our tutors was a practising Muslim, who enjoyed telling us about his religion. In fact the class used to plan especially diverting questions about Islam, so as to put off the dreaded Vocabulary test for as long as possible.

Islam interested me in a purely academic way at first, but it soon grew more personal. I remember having religious discussions with a very dear Egyptian lady, whose point of view always seemed to make much more sense than the ideas I had been taught in the church. When I went home for Christmas, I saw that the behavior of the young people at the church hardly differed from that of the non-religious people I had met at college. It seemed that the only people I had met whose religion really made a difference to their lives were the practicing Muslims that I knew.

At that stage, however, I still had an idea that Islam was only a religion for People from the Arab world or Asian and African countries. I wasn't aware that there were European and American Muslims too. The only British person I knew of who had converted was half-Japanese, but that had been for marriage purposes. Then I began to hear of English people who had become Muslim, even English women who wore the scarf and all the gear, i.e. the *Hijab*.

On one particular occasion, I visited Regent's Park Mosque out of intense curiosity. I found my way upstairs to the ladies' gallery, peered tentatively round the door, and was given a warm welcome by a very kind Indian lady, who answered my questions; but put no pressure on me in any way. I did ask to meet Westerners, who have converted to Islam, as I was by

now contemplating taking the plunge, but wanted to hear of other people's experiences. The ladies there introduced me to an American sister, who spent time with me and answered my many questions.

Then I had to go home for the Easter vacation, so I tried to sound out family and friends. One friend was intrigued and told me that I was several shades too pale to be a Muslim! Others were supportive and said "If it's what's right for you, do it, and God will look after you." My mother was not happy at first, but we talked at length. She had many questions and asked me to get her more books so that she would know what I was getting into.

During this Easter holiday, I avoided going to church on the Friday and on Sunday morning. By then my mum had enough of fielding all the questions and so I was gently coerced into going to the Sunday evening service, where I refused to join in the hymns and felt quite detached from everything that was going on.

The following day, I returned to London and the following Friday I went to the mosque to embrace Islam. I had reached the point where I knew as much as anyone could ever know as an outsider. I had even memorized the first chapter of the Holy Qur'an, the *Fatiha* or Opening, on the advice of an acquaintance who could see what was coming. That day, I knew that I had either to go ahead and enter Islam, or else go away and forget about it forever.

It is difficult to say which one thing attracted me to Islam: the prayer, with its holistic, eloquent, mind-body-and-soul worship of the Almighty Creator; the discipline of the Ramadhan fast; the respect and dignity that is embodied in the *Hijab*; the universality of this international faith; or the simple yet profound teaching of a Divine Unity. As I explored all these aspects of my new faith, the pieces began to fall into place, spiritually, it was like coming home.

However, it wasn't all plain sailing. I felt a kind of exhaustion after I embraced Islam, because in some ways it had been the most difficult decision of my life. The right decision, as far as I am concerned, but not the easiest. Many, sadly not all Muslims, made me feel welcome, but there were those who seemed to present the new comers to the religion. Fortunately, I met some others who were able to set me straight and help me overcome those difficulties.

If anyone reading this is thinking about entering Islam, I would advise them to understand that it is a big step to take, but once you are sure of it, you really should go ahead and do it. People around you will react to your decision, and there will be negative reactions, unfortunately even from Muslims, but you will be pleasantly surprised at the positive reactions you will receive. Most Muslims will welcome you warmly, and your non-Muslim friends may even admire you for having the courage of your convictions.

My own experience was that I found out who my real friends were. Some dropped me like a hot brick; others were surprised, fascinated and full of questions. Some asked me what my new name was, and wanted to use it although I didn't insist on it. One Christian asked whether I still believed in God, and when I said "Of course!" She said, "Well, that's alright then!"

Now that I have been a Muslim for ten years, thanks to God, I can't really imagine living any other way. I still get stares and comments in the street. People still take me for a foreigner, and I still get lots of questions of the type "Why did an intelligent woman like you join such a nasty oppressive religion?"

I explain as best as I can, and when I point out things such as the benefits of the Muslim women's dress, or the wisdom behind our segregated lifestyle, people often say that it makes sense. Sometimes I meet people who have holidays in Muslim countries and been very impressed with Islam; they seem

delighted to be able to ask questions, they express their respect for this religion, and let me know how exasperated they are with their narrow-minded, racist neighbors.

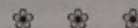
Being a British Muslim is quite an eye-opener: you quickly become aware of the realities of prejudice and racism in this society. Once you wear the *Hijab* you are regarded a foreigner and are often treated accordingly. However, the *Hijab* has not prevented me from leading an active life, studying, writing, learning to drive, taking my children out and doing the weekly shopping.

When I compare my life before and after embracing Islam, I know I have made the right decision. It isn't always easy; there are always ups and downs in every aspect of life, but my faith gives structure to my life. I feel that I belong to a great tradition, and I have something to believe in which helps me to make sense of a world which, without faith, would turn into some kind of overwhelming chaos.

"That Islam is indeed built on the five principles: of witnessing that Allah is our only Deity, and Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!), is His last Messenger who came to show us how to fulfil our existence on this earth as Muslims: Prayer; Fasting; *Zakat* and *Hajj*.

"So, one must strive to fulfil these pillars with the utmost care, concern and priority, and one must do so normally before one gets involved with other aspects of the *Deen*." (An-Nawawi's *40 Hadith*)^[1]

Huda Khattab



^[1] Courtesy: *The Muslim World League Journal* (Makkah-tul-Mukarramah, K.S.A Vol.26: Safar 1419/June 1998, pages 27-29-Editor.

I found true freedom in Islam

"Many people cannot believe why an English woman would give up her "freedom" and take on a religion which is "oppressive" to women. In fact quite the reverse is true. In this society, women are viewed as sexual objects, they are used, abused, and the victims of terrible sexual crimes. Motherhood is regarded as second place to earning money, and intelligent women are regarded as 'macho.' In Islam, women are held in high esteem, by covering their beauty they force men to treat them as human beings."

Bint Adam was born in to a family who were not religiously inclined. However, as a child, she used to read the Bible regularly. Eventually, her religious feelings gave way to the usual Western teenage pursuits of pop-music, fashion, television and so on. Later, whilst training to be a nurse she traveled to Syria, where she came in contact with Islamic culture for the first time. Her interest in Islam grew, and later a Pakistani nurse gave her a copy of the Glorious Qur'an. She immediately realized that it was the truth. She is today married with four children, and is involved with the Southampton University Islamic Society, as well as with the Women's Islamic Mission, and the charity Action For Bosnia — *Editor*.

I have always, as far back as I can remember, believed in God. As a child I used to read the Bible regularly up until the age of fourteen or fifteen. I kept my religious beliefs to myself, as I was afraid of ridicule. My family were not religious and religion was very rarely discussed except in a negative way. I never thought about the nature of Christ, whether he was human or divine. I was more interested in what he said. But I felt at the

time that the only way a person could truly follow him was to cut oneself off from this society and become a nun. I felt I couldn't do that as I also wanted to be married and have children.

I gradually got involved with the usual teenage pursuits in this country: pop music, discos and so on, and my religious feelings gradually became more and more subdued. At eighteen I left home and went to London to train as a nurse. In London I met some Arab Muslim students, who invited me to visit them in their country. I therefore traveled to Syria. I was totally ignorant of Islam and Islamic culture and was astonished at first at seeing veiled ladies and strangely dressed men. I also expected their behavior to be strange, but to my surprise, I found their ways pleasantly familiar. I admired their respect for education, family and especially religion, a far cry from the ridicule thrown at religious people here. They were hospitable and their kindness was overwhelming. On my return to England, I felt I had left my heart behind. I couldn't get this experience out of my mind and I started researching Islam. A Pakistani nurse gave me an English translation of the Qur'an, which I started to study in spare time.

I did not think I would become a Muslim. I was just full of insatiable curiosity. I began eagerly to read the Qur'an and for me this was the turning point. I instantly recognised it as the truth, the same as I had read in the Bible, the same as Jesus had said, but more powerful, more clear. I remember shaking and crying on the realization that my whole manner of living was wrong; and that I was holding in my hand the very word of God. I wanted to follow Islam immediately, but I didn't know how and I didn't know anyone who could help me. I was surrounded by non-Muslims and gradually my determination was worn away and I began to return to my former condition.

For five years I pushed Islam to the back of my mind. I felt too

ashamed to read the Qur'an or to think about Allah. I knew the cure, but refused to take it.

Unexpectedly, one of my old Syrian friends contacted me again, and this brought back all my memories and I prayed to Allah for Him to forgive me, and not to let me die there and then for fear that I would go to hell. One week later, I underwent major surgery for a sudden illness in which I nearly died and I felt that Allah had brought me close to death and then gave me a second chance.

I came back to Islam and made the declaration of faith at the U.K. Islamic Mission in London. Afterwards, I stayed with a Pakistani family for two months. They also introduced me to my husband, who by coincidence is also Syrian. My advice to anyone who is contemplating becoming a Muslim is not to be afraid of doing so; it is only the devil who tries to dissuade you. For once you do so, Allah opens every door for you and the way is easy to follow.

I went through five years of torture, before finally embracing Islam. Thank God, the way was made easy for me. Many people cannot believe why an English woman would give up her "freedom" and take on a religion which is "oppressive" to women. In fact quite the reverse is true. In this society, women are viewed as sexual objects, they are used, abused, and the hood is regarded as second place to earning money, and intelligent women are regarded as 'macho.' In Islam, women are held in high esteem, by covering their beauty they force men to treat them as human beings.

Motherhood is held so high in Islam, in fact, Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) said that: "Paradise lies under the feet of the mothers." No Muslim woman regards earning money as more meritorious in the sight of Allah than caring for her children. The education of Muslim girls and women is regarded just as important as for

Muslim boys and men. I feel personally that Islam has liberated me from so many oppressive things and has given me my self-respect back. Allah has said in the Qur'an that whoever does good and believes, whether they be male or female, they will be rewarded by Him. This spiritual equality of the sexes, the races, the rich and the poor is the main foundation of Islamic brotherhood. The best person is the one who is the most pious. Each Muslim is the brother or sister of another Muslim and, indeed the, bond of faith can be stronger than blood ties, if your family are not Muslims.

I have been a Muslim for just over nine years now, thanks to Allah, I have a husband and four children and we do our best to lead an Islamic way of life. The relationship between myself and my husband is strengthened by the fact that we both believe in Allah and our mentality is the same. We want the same things and have the same opinions. In an age when divorce is rife, we feel reinforced by our faith in Allah and are able to withstand the many pressures these days.

We live in an age in which AIDS, single-parent families, house repossessions and abortions are common. Following an Islamic lifestyle protects you from all these things. In fact Islam has all the solutions to all the problems faced by a modern society. This country needs Islam; the whole world needs it, because it is the guidance of God and only He knows the right way for us all to live. *Alhamdulillah (MWL Magazine)*^[1]

Ibnantu Adam



^[1] Courtesy: MWL Magazine and reproduced from the Saudi Gazette, 28th April, 2000, page 7

My years in a Mission School...^[1]

When someone asked me, "Have you ever felt a deep... emptiness inside you?" as he quietly opened his Bible I have my ten long years in a Christian school to help me fix my eyes soulfully on him and gravely admit, "Yes... when I'm hungry." Life in a missionary school with all its quirks and small victories gave me an attitude of amused exasperation as I counter overzealous missionaries. Their eagerness and superficial knowledge of the Bible they so fervently quote, reminds me of the many attempts my friends have made to save me.

I remember all those young faces as they try to convince me that I am bound for hell without Jesus (may peace be upon him!). Concerned classmates who honestly believe I will one day 'see the light' as they expound on the incredible selflessness of Jesus who "died" to save them. "Who was he?" he was GOD'S ONLY Son. Well, if God is so cruel as to kill his own son to save the world, no wonder it's the son you pray to, not God "But JESUS IS GOD." You mean you have two Gods? "No, I mean JESUS IS ALSO GOD." What about the Holy Ghost? "Oh its God, too. They're all part of the HOLY TRINITY." I thought you said you have one God? "We do. He is (a hasty revision of last Sunday School lesson) DIVIDED INTO THREE like sugar." Like SUGAR? HOW? "Well, we have sugar, dissolved sugar and... I'll have to ask my Sunday School teacher. I forgot how he had explained it..."

My friends' intentions were honest; they truly believed Jesus "died" to save them. What they did not know was, the many carefully devised theories to support their statements. They

only stoutly insist one must have faith and believe, a phrase they frequently resort to in any debate that got uncomfortably too deep.

I recall many heated debates we have during Scripture class. My teacher had once read out the principle of 'turning the other cheek' in face of adversary. She had smugly pointed out the selfless nobility of that action, a so very Christian action. She picked on me to illustrate that Islam advocates no such selflessness. I strongly agreed it does not. She deigned to beam graciously at me for proving her point. I continued very amiably that it is a futile thing to advocate. Islam would rather the victim walk away, not hit back but restrain himself and walk away. However, I shrugged, one always has a choice. Her smile still in place, she asked the rest of what they would rather do, to leave or turn the other cheek. The Christian majority all agreed to leave is better. Turning the other cheek would only mean another slap and a kick too. One has, after all to survive.

A Christian environment made me acutely aware of myself as a Muslim. I am very thankful that Islam is able to withstand the many intellectual tests that Christianity failed. The absurdities of the Bible at times have cleared any doubts I felt that it might have been divinely inspired after all. My Christian friends and I have held competitions on who can read the long list of Jesus' ancestry right up to Adam in one breath (usually during the morning services in the hall). We would go through the list quickly and laugh at the ridiculous pains the author took to trace his paternal line. "Why did he do it?" I asked after one such competition. "Joseph didn't father Jesus? Why bother tracing Adam through Joseph?" They breathlessly reply after some thought, "Dunnofor funlah!" In a way, they were right. The Bible thus proved to be no threat to my faith. Having studied a few gospels in depth for my 'O' levels, I have yet to

^[1] Courtesy: *Yaqeen International* October 7, 1986, page 128-130

find it factually compelling, other than the majesty of the author's style. Which was why I persisted in using the King James Version instead of the Revised Standard Version — a habit my teacher was always admonishing me for. Apparently, each version has its own.... ersion. I'm so glad we have only one version of the Qur'an — pure, unadulterated version, where I don't have to lean over my neighbor's shoulder to see what her Bible says that mine doesn't.

It was compulsory for everyone to go to Church during the earlier years of my school career. The Reverends would sometimes take the opportunity to give barbed comments on other religions. One distinguished Reverend was particularly obnoxious in his comments about Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, considering the multi-religious faith of his listeners. We used to talk passionately of reporting him to the Ministry of Education after such sessions. But we always ended up meekly filing into church without much mutiny. We were only thirteen at that time. However, the last straw was placed when the school brought in a Malay Christian in my final year. It had been our school's annual effort to evangelize in a week called 'Missionary Week'. Attractive evangelists were called to — perform and I mean perform — in school. These people sung so, well created so much fun, and were so good to look at that 'we were all enchanted. Wayward students suddenly became devout philosophers willing to stay behind, sacrifice a few hours to discuss Christian Philosophy with these Adonis. I remember a gorgeous, curly-haired Hawaiian blonde who fired my friend's enthusiasm. Everyone lined up to take photographs with him, after, of course, having impressed him with suitable expressions of deep piety. They had all sung well, and caught in the sudden mood of piety, my friends responded emotionally, putting up their hands and waving their arms as they sang along. It would have been very moving if I had not already known that this passionate devotion was always mood-inspired;

the revival of spirituality would fizzle out as suddenly as it was inspired. My friends were like switches. The right connection, the correct current and voila! You get a half of emotional Christians. Turn the current off and my friends revert to their 'coy' habits and pagan beliefs of hungry ghosts and ancestor-worship yet to be included in the Bible.

That year the school had a new ace. They brought in a Malay Christian called Adam — pronounced of course as 'Adam' (as opposed to 'Eve'). Well, Adam created a furore when he got on the stage at one point in the week and gave a heart-rending account of the misery his life, was in before Jesus saved him. How imprisoned he became by the bondage of Islam, how ridiculous to him the five pillars were, how absurd the ritual of prayers, and how agonizing the rules of faith (I take it that he meant fasting and the abstinence from pork and alcohol. My heart bleeds for him) and other assorted cruelty and evils of Islam. That touching piece of oratory was his privilege as a new convert to tell us the joy of Christianity. I cannot excuse the extreme bad taste of the school in allowing a former Muslim to tear apart Islam in the presence of the teenaged Muslim students. Compelled to sit through one session after another and then to hear their faith being ridiculed was too much to bear. Many girls were left crying in frustrated anger and helpless despair. They could not bear the smug satisfaction he took in belittling Islam.

Well, the incident brought about a whole lot of changes after that. The Muslims feeling threatened as a minority group closed ranks and built a wall of solidarity. The senior girls were quickly informed by the younger ones when Adam in the company of a few teachers took it upon themselves to hold an informal evangelizing stint upon the primary school Muslims. I went there with some other girls to sit through that session and with saccharine smiles proceed to detract Adam from his

purpose by asking pointed questions about Christianity and counter his questions about Islam. It felt good to sit there, squeeze a small hand in reassurance as we gathered together in defence of our kind. One of our school Malay teacher was there and she gave a marvelous defence of Islam, speaking tactfully and refraining from badmouthing Christianity.

During recess breaks, the Muslims would gather together in that fateful period to gain strength from reassuring each other and informing the rest to the latest development. It got to be so obvious that our Vice-Principal called me up to ask me why we were so united and to discourage us from being too clannish. It was a mark of triumph for me. Never have I been so proud to be a Muslim and of Muslims as when I stood in that office getting lectured on being too strong as a group. Praise be to Allah. It was then that many of us rediscovered our values and the faith that had lain dormant swelled to fill our hearts. The matter was brought up to Jamivah. The school received several friendly calls from infinitely informative parents who explained in vivid terms what they thought of the incident. From then on, the Muslims were not compelled to go to church and were to sit apart from the rest of the assembly during morning service. It was a small but significant triumph.

I am very glad I went to a Missionary school. I learnt how to interact with non-Muslims in their element and to cope with Christian advances. I have wondered if Christianity was the true religion after all when Billy Graham asked in a blistering speech — 'What if the faith you think is true, is not true after all, WHAT IF Christianity IS THE ANSWER? WHAT IF you learn when it is too late you're wrong?' WHAT If — and shivered in fear that I might have 'murtad-ed,' and then have gone to the Bible class the next day and wondered what the dickens got into me to have thought it truer than Islam. I have seen a vocal Christian friend who always professed deep piety and went

regularly to church decide to kill herself when she got pregnant (and feeling shocked to the core because as a Muslim I would never dare think of that) and thought she did not was disillusioned totally by her *superficial* faith.

I have had my best friend, a Christian, asked me what happens to her father at his death, if he was already in heaven or still in the grave, for her mother had dreamed he wanted bananas and had left several bunches by the graveside. I told her according to Islam the body would, if it is good go into a temporary rest, and if bad, into temporary torture until the Day of Judgement comes. Then only would it go to Heaven or Hell. She digested it gravely and said it made sense. I was touched that she consulted me on the matter that had obviously been troubling her. I have learnt a thousand little things that have infinitesimally broadened my mind and made me so much more perceptive of things around, of moral issues and religious tolerance. So now I debate strongly with earnest evangelists and deep down in my heart know that Islam is the true religion. My years in a Mission school had, ironically, made me a better Muslim.^[1]

Ida Yezmin Bachtiar



I was doing things that are normally done by a Muslim!

Sister Jane comes from a strict Catholic family of U.S.A, her mother being a religious teacher and her father working for the FBI, was a devout Catholic who could not tolerate anything against his religious beliefs. As far as

^[1] Courtesy: *The Muslim Reader*

sister Jane is concerned, she, on the contrary, was not satisfied with the system prevailing in her household.

She was introduced to Islam in 1986 by a Lebanese Muslim Salam Wahhab who suggested her to read some books on Islam. She found books written by Shaikh Ahmad Deedat.

Sister Jane belongs to a rich family who has done her Bachelor in Food & Nutrition from University of Alabama in 1948. With all comforts of life, she was confused and upset and had no religion to associate with. After about 2 years' study of Islam, she took *Shahadah* in 1988.

After her acceptance of Islam, her family was horrified. Her mother felt as if she had rejected her while her father hated the religion which he felt had stolen her from him.

She married Nader Mansur, a Palestinian who was living in U.S.A. In the eyes of her father her marriage with an Arab Muslim was the lowest crime which she had committed. None from her family attended the wedding ceremony except her brother Jim who had a soft corner for Islam. It is notable that she was deprived of all the wealth and inheritance. All her friends and relatives deserted her. But she faced all this situation very bravely. She is glad that she had been saved from the 'evils of the world'.

Her conversion story reminds us of the circumstances which occurred in the early stage of *Makkan* life of the Noble Prophet of Islam and the treatment which was meted out to the reverts of Islam. With the courtesy of Riyadh Daily^[1] we feel pleasure in presenting her *Voyage to Islam* story:

"I was always inclined towards religion. I came from a strict Catholic family and my mother was a religious teacher. We had nuns and priests in the family as well. My father, who worked

^[1] Courtesy: Riyadh Daily, 16th February, 2001.

for the FBI, was a devout Catholic and could tolerate everything except going against his religious beliefs.

"Disgruntled with the system I started searching for more information but I was too scared to question the theologians and some refutable elements in the religion that I was made to practice.

"I started covering myself and abstaining from alcohol in my 20s—it was an ironic tradeoff— an American like myself was turning to Islam and the Muslims living in America, adapting a Western lifestyle.

"My introduction to Islam was in 1986 through a Lebanese Muslim Salam Wahhab who I met at Quick Mart. He noticed that I was dressed very conservatively and inquired about my religion — up until then no one had questioned my religious beliefs. He suggested I go to a nearby library and recommended some books on Islam. I found some books written by Ahmad Deedat, a multi-lingual religious writer who had studied both Christianity and Islam who I can say was a true inspiration and a great influence on me.

"I had done my Bachelors in Food and Nutrition from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa in 1984 and was earning \$18,000 per year. Coming from a rich family with all the comforts of life I was confused and had no religion to associate with and grew increasingly sad and felt empty. At the same time I was doing things that are normally done by a Muslim, covering myself and not eating pork. I was by this time well read in Islamic preachings.

"In 1988 I took my *Shahdha* (formal proclamation of converting to Islam) in the presence of two witnesses — a couple I knew. It is not essential or a compulsory act but a validation to show others that you are a Muslim member of the Community.

"My family were horrified. I remember my mother saying: 'Jane were you raised on the same planet?' My mother felt that

I was rejecting her as a parent and thought that I was going through a stupid phase in my life. My father hates the religion which he feels has stolen me from him.

"Through my Muslim friends I was introduced to Mansur, a Palestinian Arab living in the States and we decided to get married. It was more of an arranged marriage and in my father's eyes marrying an Arab Muslim was the lowest crime anyone could commit.

"No one from my family attended the simple wedding reception we held soon after Ramadan except my brother Jim who shows some interest in the religion too I was deprived of all the wealth and inheritance.

"My friends had long since deserted me as they thought that I was taking things too seriously. People think since you have married a Muslim you are forced to dress up in *Hijab*. In America I have had people laughing at me, screaming in horror when they saw me standing in a queue in a mall covered from head to toe. But I don't care or feel embarrassed and I'm glad that I was saved from the evils of the world.

"I have faced financial hardships and since we moved to Dubai my husband has suffered losses in the business. But I have utilized my time and have been involved in a number of Islamic activities. For the last few years I have worked alongside Dr Bilal Philips, proof reading Islamic books published and distributed all over the world for English speaking Muslims. I feel privileged to be of help to the cause of Islam. The English speaking Muslims I feel are so much more knowledgeable as they are constantly seeking the truth and more information about the religion which in turn strengthens their faith." (Arabian Woman)

Jane Nader



Heart of a Muslim

I did not know who I was until began studying religion. Although raised as a Christian, I had never been satisfied with the church's "teachings." I hadn't known other religions." I hadn't known other religions existed. I felt tremendous conviction to find 'Who' my Creator was and what my existence and purpose was on earth. In searching diverse Christian beliefs, I found too many, each professing to be 'The One'. Unfulfilled, I started researching other beliefs: Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, one after another.

Depression began to cloud my thoughts. I played with ideas that all religions were myths, like the Santas and Easter bunnies that I had been raised with. Atheism crossed my mind, and that thought frightened me. If there was no Creator, then there was really no purpose in living. The modesty and caring I was brought up to believe in seemed to be fruitless. It only brought me hardships. The world wasn't modest or caring. I had been ridiculed for my puritanical lifestyle. My life was writing, books and study. I hadn't been able to share in attitudes of those around me. Many kept trying to get me to change, to "realize that it was the twentieth century", to "loosen up and have some fun", or so they said. My children, writing and studies had been my life until 1987. Then everything changed. My father passed away that year. Devotion, loyalty and purity hadn't helped me in keeping him alive. I couldn't do anything to help him as he grew more ill. When he was gone, I felt alone. Sadness filled my heart. But it was 'my' sadness. I couldn't let others feel it through me or for me.

I began looking back. My life had been difficult, disappointing and hard. The only reason I felt I had to complete the life cycle,

was because it was by nearly every religion I studied, a horrendous and unforgivable sin to end it at one's own decision. Finally, working through the grief process, I realized that everything I learned made very little sense. I prayed through tears of sincerity for 'my Creator', whoever that might be, to guide me to that which was right. My studies brought knowledge of Him, but my heart could not find Him. I knew I couldn't do it alone. I sought Divine guidance.

The next morning I rose from sleep, turned on the television, trying desperately to fill my mind with nothingness to distract nagging thoughts about religions and beliefs. On the screen was Phil Donahue, the popular talk show host, with a couple, the man speaking with a foreign accent about Islam and the woman, his wife, who had converted to Islam. I was not too interested in what she might say, as I had known numerous women who converted to their husband's religions. I had rejected this as I felt that one's beliefs should be because of one's own personal convictions and relationship with their Creator. As she began to speak, I saw and felt something very different. She sat in a most modest dress with her head covered, but to me she looked only pure and beautiful. It didn't matter that you couldn't see what her body or hair looked like. It was in her eyes and voice. She seemed very much Muslim and believed in Islam. I wondered, could I ever be accepted as a Muslim by other Muslims? Were there other blonde-haired, blue-eyed, female Muslim? I knew so little about this new religion but something was happening to me even then. Something was drawing my heart to listen, but the visual alone was making me sit up and take notice. My depression disappeared. My attention was clearer than ever.

It was time in my life that I heard of Islam. I had no understanding of the religion which I now consider a way of life, rather than just a belief. I can't remember much of what

they said but the conviction was growing in my soul. Something about the Qur'an, about staying modest in this perverted world, about husbands being faithful and loyal to their families. None of it seemed to be the hype religions use to manipulate their parishioners. It seemed logical and dealt with reality. I liked that. It made sense for me. I wished I'd known about this growing up. I'd always kept an open mind, never judging acquaintances for the way they lived, but I could never change to live the way they did, although it ruined many relationships. But here, in front of my eyes, seeping into my ears, were the words that fit the way I thought, lived and believed. Now I had a word for it all: Islam!

I was living alone in my home in a little town in the South. There were no books on Islam at the library. They pre-read all their books and a committee approved which ones they would shelve. Being born and raised in New York, I knew how to get information others might consider censored. I was told there was one Muslim, living in the town, married to a Methodist. I called the Methodist church, explained what I was looking for and they gave me the name of the family. I called to see if he might know what translation of the Qur'an was best and where I might acquire one. He gave me information and I ordered a copy of the Qur'an, a pocket book edition. When I got my copy in the mail, I read it cover to cover in two days. It was poetry to me. It was in that moment, I embraced Islam and was embraced by Islam.

I was like an addict. Never before was I so obsessed with anything. I couldn't get enough of it. I called the Saudi Arabian embassy in Washington, DC and within a week my mailbox was filled with beautiful and precious information. I holed up in my home, locking doors, closing drapes, unplugging phones, not speaking to anyone. I didn't want to be disturbed from my newly found treasures. I was in Paradise. Everything I read

suit me. I saw through the messages and words the way. I believed had not been old fashioned or wrong. Finally, I had found my Creator's wishes and commands had been with me all along. Where I went from there, I was sure, would be limitless, not accepted by others perhaps, but limitless for my heart.

I believe Allah will direct my steps in whatever way He chooses. I thought back of how I prayed so hard and for the first time, the Creator had answered through a talk show that had lasted only an hour out of the years of my past life.

Finding a place for books, tapes and prayer rugs, I ordered everything I could. I received another copy of the Qur'an. Such beautiful words filled the thick, green and gold hard-cover book in Arabic and the translation of its meaning in English. In reading it from cover to cover, I started dreaming about mosques and foreign countries, something I had never dreamed about before. They were lucid and special. I never really understood all aspects of the meanings, but they brought me peace. Always doubting my own beliefs after years of being told what was right by others, the dreams were the verification that Allah did guide me to Islam. I read passages every night. I don't understand everything yet because I don't know other Muslims and have no one to talk to or ask questions of. But I have recently found the Islamic Horizons with great reading and services I didn't know existed.

Now I even have a covering for my head. Although I don't exactly know how to properly pray yet, I put my prayer rug on the floor, cover my head and I do pray, five times a day, repeating the words found in the first *Surat* (the opening), and hope that Allah will accept my ignorance while I am still trying to learn. My hope is that Allah will lead me to the correct ways, laws and prayers that will allow me to live in the fullest for Him and develop the true Islamic lifestyle. What I do know is that I have finally found the way and inside I have found what had always been the part of me that seemed to be missing: The

Heart of a Muslim.^[1]

After I reverted to Islam, my days were spent in reading everything new that I could find regarding Islam and reviewing the information that I had already collected. I wanted to obtain all possible information to live as closely as I could in the way that Allah had commanded.

The first Ramadan fast was very easy for me. I was very careful to adhere to the rules as had been told to me. I had ordered dates from a health food store and when the sun settled every night I broke the fast by prayer and eating dates before eating a meal. I didn't find anything difficult in maintaining the daily schedule as it seemed to be on my mind continuously throughout each day. It was something I felt happy about doing and I felt deeply close to other Muslims even though I knew no others, except for a person who had called from Saudi Arabia.

My poems have been published in an international magazine. However, I was elated when I received a congratulation note from the Middle East, it was more than just rewarding. I was delighted to hear from a Muslim and I responded to thank him. Then an exchange of letters began. It was near the month of Ramadan, something I'd not been exactly sure how to proceed with. The day before the beginning of the fast, he called from Saudi Arabia to tell me first hand about it. The thoughtfulness alone was amazing to me bringing tears to my eyes after we hung up. I wondered if he knew what a special thing, he had done for me. Telling him how much I appreciated just didn't seem to be enough, but I knew after that, Allah would bless him for that act of kindness.

Fasting that first Ramadan made me feel special in a way, I was conscious that I was doing something to prove to Allah that my acceptance of Islam had been a serious and life altering

^[1] Sr. D. Jacqueline Cosens is a freelance writer and researcher who has served as a newspaper editor.

decision. I knew that by doing so He would be pleased in some way with me. It gave me a feeling of order in my life much the same way Islam had done and giving up simply anything for Allah seemed much more a labor of love than any sort of duty. It also left me with a wondrous peaceful feeling knowing that Muslims all over the world, no matter the location, were fasting during this same month of Ramadan.

There are many aspects of the Fast of Ramadan that I am sure I did not understand that first time and I know I still have yet to learn and develop. I had also been told that you should give away food at the end of the Fast and I did not know whether this meant to other Muslims or not. Since there were no other Muslims where I lived, I took a bag of groceries and left them on the porch of one of the many unfortunate families that lived in the town I was residing in, the same family I had left food for prior to my acceptance of Islam.

Feeling almost a euphoria in the month of Ramadan, my own physical health seemed to improve. Certainly that the special month brought me a tremendous love and deeper spirituality that surely every true follower of Islam must feel.

On *Eid* Day, I wasn't sure exactly what I was doing was correct. Living alone, I broke the fast with prayers to Allah and read portions from the Qur'an. Later, I went about visiting with relatives and friends who were not Muslims and trying to explain what Ramadan was and they of course mostly scoffed and joked. It was clear to them when they saw they had dampened my spirits a bit, that their remarks had hurt my feelings, so they would quickly admit that I did seem happier and looked healthier. I was determined not to have contact with others at the end of the next year's Fast. I didn't want anyone or anything to spoil the peaceful and contented feeling that I had gained from 'my first Ramadan'.^[1]

D. Jacqueline Cosens

^[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Horizons*, January/ February 1997 Vol. 26, No. 1 page 46

Impressions of Hajj

I have deep roots in America. Some of my father's forebears migrated to the Virginia Colony in 1609. And on my mother's side are ancestors who fought with Washington and Lincoln and a great grandfather who was a Pony Express rider. Until I was sixteen, I myself had had an upbringing generally regarded as typically American, Midwestern, middle class and Protestant. I grew up in Bay City, Michigan, belonged to the Episcopal Church, went to Sunday School and sang in the church choir.

At sixteen however, I discovered the Qur'an. The words (of the first chapter), simple, and direct, so impressed me that I immediately set out to memorize them. Indeed they drew me into Islam, an example perhaps of Prophet Muhammad's (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) assertion that everyone is born a Muslim and made a Jew or a Christian by his parents.

From that time forward I charted my life in the direction of Makkah:

Before I embarked on the Pilgrimage, its rituals seemed to me just so many curious exercises. But as I participated in the event of the Pilgrimage, the meaning of these rites unfolded, my understanding of Islam was deepened and I learned more fully what it meant to be a Muslim. Indeed, this is why God had commanded Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) to issue the call for the Pilgrimage:

"That they (the pilgrims) may witness things that are of benefit to them..." (*Surat Al-Hajj*, 22:28)

(For example, towards the end of the *Hajj* when the time of making the Sacrifice came), I began to feel uneasy. Since I have

not completely outgrown the tender-heartedness had known as a child, I had balked the idea of the Sacrifice long before being confronted with it and now the time had come to do it. What was I to do? As a girl I had cared for lost dogs or stray cats, adopting any fledgling that had fallen from its nest, splinting a bird's broken leg with matchstick and feeding injured butterflies on sugar syrup. But a companion had been adamant. "You must do the Sacrifice".

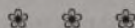
Back at our building Mina I turned to the Qur'an. I found that the Sacrifice has many meanings. It commemorates Abraham's offering of his son's life and God's rejection of this sacrifice in exchange for Abraham's submission to God's will, it marks the end of idolatry among Arabs; it is an offering of thanks-giving to the God of Creation Who has been so benevolent to mankind, and it teaches the well-to-do to share their blessings to:

"eat thereof (the Sacrifice) and feed the beggar and the suppliant" (*Surat Hajj*, 22:36)

As I pondered what I had read, a great weight was lifted from my conscience, I suddenly saw that the Sacrifice upholds the sacredness of life, that it, in fact, constitutes a pledge by the pilgrim that he will slay for sustenance only. And where I had felt reluctance before, I now felt eagerness to fulfil all the requirements of my pilgrimage.^[1]

(From *Aramco World Magazine*.)

M. Janes (U.S.A.)



^[1] Courtesy: *The Australian Muslim News*, 20th June 3rd July, 1995, page 5

Conversion to Islam my own Choice!

The 'reversion to Islam' story of Mrs. Jemima Imran Khan is not only interesting but also of historical importance. Jemima Goldsmith is the daughter of Sir James Goldsmith, tycoon, politician and cad who died on July 19, 1997.

Although capable of charming himself into most circles, Sir James was always an outsider — part British, part French, part Jewish, part Catholic, and never really any of them. He first attracted attention as a schoolboy at Eton, where he won 8,000/ Sterling pounds on the horses. Like many buccaneering pirates, Sir James gained his Knighthood in Harold Wilson's infamous 'lavender list'. In 1994 his *L'Autre Europe* won 14% of the vote in France and he was elected to the European Parliament.^[1]

According to the reports Sir James was opposed to marrying his daughter with Imran Khan. He said that he was deeply concerned when his daughter announced her intention to marry Imran. He told his friends that he was upset that his daughter the 'apple of his eye', was about to become engaged to a man twice her age. But later on, he agreed and taken the pragmatic step of giving his blessing to the marriage.

Jemima, an English student at Bristol University also agreed to the marriage and to live her life in Lahore. But her father wanted Jemima to finish her education prior to her marriage. She had to take her final examination in five weeks' time. On the contrary, the wedding was to take place on June 20, 1995 at Richmond Register office in Southwest London.

Initial tensions among the Goldsmith family were resolved. Jemima's mother Lady Annabel said: "We are really pleased. We are all happy." And Imran Khan insisted: "Both our families

^[1] *The Economist* 26th July, 1997, page 79

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approve and are extremely happy about match."

According to a report, Imran Khan, in a poignant gesture, presented Jemima with a diamond, made into an engagement ring, which he first bought for his late, adored mother. On her death bed, she returned it to him saying: 'I want you to give this to the girl you marry'.^[1]

It is noteworthy that a lot of controversy arose on the marriage of Imran Khan with Jemima. One of the Pakistanis wrote a letter against this marriage. He claimed: that I am — as millions of other Muslims are shocked by the news that Imran Khan is about to marry a Jewish girl... Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the Qur'an and history knows very well that how treacherous the Zionists have been. Their own Scriptures make no secret that they use their females to gain political and other achievements... By marrying a Jewish girl Imran Khan is committing the biggest blunder of his life. This may ruin his life here and in the Hereafter.

Although it has been claimed that his wife-to-be has converted to Islam, but this seems to be a conversion for marriage and not for Islam. Such conversion has no meaning. By her background and the fact that her father owns a nightclub will not convince anyone that she has embraced Islam by her heart and not for the purpose of marriage.

"This is not like the conversion of Maryam Jamilah who studied Islam for years and had correspondence with many scholars of all faiths. After being convinced fully that Islam was the true religion she became a Muslim. This does not appear to be the case with Imran Khan's fiancée. If his wife has become a real *Muslimah*, please make it public with concrete proofs. Going to *Ummrah* can't serve that purpose."

[1] Arab News, Monday, May 15, 1995. Page 17.

According to Urdu News' report of May 14, 1995, Jemima embraced Islam and it was also announced that after their marriage they would go to Makkah Al-Mukarramah to perform *Umrah*. In the meantime, Imran Khan refuted all kinds of criticism Jamia Imran Khan who after entering the fold of Islam took her name as Haiqa Khan, also refuted all sorts of criticism by saying that "I have not embrace Islam for the sake of marriage. This is my spiritual decision. I have taken this decision after knowing and fully realizing it."^[1]

According to another report of AFP from London Imran Khan's wife says her decision to become a Muslim was her own choice. "Contrary to current opinion, my decision to convert to Islam was entirely my own choice and in no way hurried."

Jemima told the *Sunday Telegraph*. "This began last July (1994) Whilst the actual conversion took place in early February 1995."

She said she had studied the Qur'an in depth.

"What began purely as intellectual curiosity, slowly ripened into a dawning realization of the universal and eternal truth that is Islam," she said, adding: "Judging by some of the press, a Western woman's happiness hinges largely clothes. Such superficialities have very little to do with true happiness."

"I am aware, too aware of the enormous task of adapting to a new and radically different culture. But with the love of my husband and support of his family, I look forward to the challenge wholeheartedly." It is noteworthy that Sir James Goldsmith is Jewish and her (Jemima's mother) mother is a Catholic.^[2]

Regarding the criticism and controversy about the reversion to Islam of Jemima Imran Khan that it is not clear that she has

[1] Urdu News 29th May, 1995 page, 8

[2] Riyadh Daily, Riyadh (K.S.A) 29th May, 1995, back page also *Islamic Horizons*, May-June 1995, page 33

embraced Islam by her heart and not for the purpose of marriage. As a matter of fact, we being Muslims, should not doubt one's intention because Allah knows everything. He being All-Knowing, All Wise. On the contrary, we should accept in good faith. There is one very good example in our history of Osama (may Allah be pleased with him!) who refused to fight Muslims. The incident is as follows.

"When a young lad, Osama was sent by the Master (Holy Prophet, may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) to deal with a party of non-believers. In the encounter that took place, the enemy fled. Osama and another Muslim chased a non-believer. When overtaken, the fellow suddenly declared: 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger.

At this Osama's companion held back his hand but Osama pierced him to death with his lance.

When the Master (Holy Prophet, may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) came to know of the incident, he said addressing Osama: "You killed a man, although he declared himself to be a Muslim!". "Please Master," replied Osama, "the man did it to save his life."

The reply did not satisfy the Master and he repeated his remarks a number of times. This taught Osama a lasting lesson. Never again did he do any harm to a Muslim.^[1]

According to another version the Holy Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) asked Osama, "Did your tear his heart to see whether he had accepted Islam to save his life?"

In a statement Imran Khan said that 'Jemima insisted on performing *Umrah*'.

Upon their arrival at the King Abdul Aziz International Airport,

^[1] *Some Companions of the Prophet*, Part One by Fazl Ahmad, Lahore, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1972, pages 48-49

Imran and Jemima were accorded a very warm welcome by Prince Faisal Ibn Muqrin Ibn Abdul Aziz and friends and admirers. Prince Faisal has been supporting Imran's humanitarian work.

"I am grateful to Prince Faisal, not only for his help to my hospital, but also for making excellent arrangements for my tour to the Kingdom," Imran said.

The couple had a busy schedule to visit Makkah Al-Mukarramah to perform *Umrah*, Madinah Al-Munawwarah to pray in the Prophet's Mosque. They also attended a grand dinner reception at the Inter Continental Hotel in Jeddah, on July 19, 1995. Here is her conversion.

By marrying Imran Khan, Jemima Goldsmith, the 21 years old, daughter of billionaire Sir James, not only embraced the world's supposedly most handsome sportsman but also the Muslim faith, taking the name Haiqa. In an exclusive account, she tells how she journeyed from the glamorous society of London to the austere religion of Lahore.

The media present me as a naive, besotted 21 years old who has made a hasty decision without really considering the consequences thus effectively condemning herself to a life of interminable subservience, misery and isolation.

Although I must confess I have rather enjoyed the various depictions of a veiled and miserable Haiqa Khan incarcerated in chains, the reality is somewhat different. Contrary to current opinion, my decision to convert to Islam was entirely my own choice and in no way hurried.

Whilst the act of conversion itself is surprisingly quick entailing the simple assertion that "there is only one God and Muhammed is His Prophet" the preparation is not necessarily so speedy a process.

In my case, this began July 1995, whilst the actual conversion

took place in early February — three months before the Nikah in Paris. During that time, I studied in depth both the Qur'an and the works of various Islamic scholars (Gai Eaton; the Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic and Muhammad Asad), thus giving me ample time to reflect before making my decision. What began as intellectual curiosity slowly ripened into a dawning realization of the universal and eternal truth that is Islam.

In the statement she said, I particularly stressed that I had converted to Islam entirely "Through my own convictions". The significance of this has been largely ignored by the press. The point is that my conversion was not, as so many have assumed, a pre-requisite to my marriage. It was entirely my own choice.

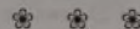
Religiously speaking, there was absolutely no compulsion for me to convert prior to my marriage. As it explicitly states in the Qur'an, a Muslim is permitted to marry from "the People of the Book" — in other words, either a Christian or a Jew.^[1]

I believe that much of this hostility towards my marriage and conversion stems from widespread misconceptions about an alien culture and religion. Not only is there a huge gulf between the western view of Islam and the reality, but there is in some cases also a significant distinction between Islam based directly on the Qur'an and the Sunnah and that practiced by some Islamic societies. During the last year, I have had the opportunity to visit Pakistan on three separate occasions and have observed Islamic Family life in practice. Thus, to some extent I now feel qualified to judge for myself the true role and position of women in the religion. Islam is definitely not a religion which subjugates women whilst elevating men to the status of mini-dictators in their own homes. I saw in theory and practice how Islam promotes the essential notion of the family unit without subjugating its female members. I am nevertheless fully aware that women are sometimes exploited

^[1] Arab News 18th July, 1995, page 20.

and oppressed in Islamic societies, as in other parts of the world. To the press, it seems that a woman's happiness hinges largely upon her access to night-clubs, alcohol and revealing clothes; and the absence of such apparent freedom and luxuries in Islamic societies is seen as an infringement of her basic rights. However, as we all know, such superficialities have very little to do with true happiness. I am more than willing to forego the transient pleasures derived from alcohol and nightclubs; and as for clothes, I find the traditional *shalwar qameez* (tunic and trousers) worn by most Pakistani women far more elegant and feminine than anything in my wardrobe! As for my chances of marital success? Well, when I see that in a society based on family life the divorce rate is just a fraction of that in European or American society, then, would my chances of success have been any less if I had to marry a Westerner? I am all too aware of the enormous task of adapting to a new and radically different culture, but I look forward to the challenge wholeheartedly, and would like to feel that people wish me well. — (Y.M.D.)^[1]

Jemima Imran Khan
(Pakistani Sportsman's wife)



^[1] Riyadh Daily Friday, 4th October, 1996, page 8

Faith in Allah is a big advantage!

"The following is 'Journey to Islam' story of sister Jewelle which we have the honour to present with the courtesy of *Young Muslim Digest* and *Riyadh Daily*.^[1] To run import-export business of children books sister Jewelle has to learn Arabic on the advice of Commercial Attache at the Saudi Embassy in Washington. So, she started learning it privately from a tutor named Saeed.

She studied books, tapes and videos and learned a lot about Islam. Her teacher advised her to submit herself to Allah Who will take away all the pain and loneliness which she was feeling. So, she prayed to Allah during the night and when she woke up the next day she felt completely relieved of all pain. She was so convinced by thy Islamic teachings that she embraced the Religion of Allah at the Msajid Al-Hijrah in Falls Church Virginia.

Shortly later, during the holy month of Ramzan, she went to Makkah to perform *Umrah* in the last 10 days of the holy month. She is satisfied because she trusts that her experiences with Islam have shown her that if you follow Allah's direction you will have everything you need.

Two years ago, at the age of 23, Jewellee was trying to open an import-export company to sell children's books around the world. She gave much thought of working with Saudi Arabia above any other country. When she contacted the commercial attach at the Saudi Embassy in Washington DC, she learned that all contracts with her sponsor must be in Arabic. That prompted her to study Arabic so she would know what she was

^[1] Courtesy: *Young Muslim Digest* and *Riyadh Daily*. 17th September, 1999, page 9

signing. She went to a local language school where she took classes with a private tutor named Suad.

"She was one of the nicest people I have ever met as well as one of the most religious," Jewellee said. All the books, tapes, and videos that she studied from such as *Iftah Ya Sim Sim* centered on Islam, so without realizing it she was learning about Islam all along.

"I was not brought up with any religious indoctrination. I knew the basics, but I had never gone to church," Jewellee pointed out. The same time this was going on, she was having the "hardest time" in her life. She was on the east coast and her family was on the west coast, the friends she had "were not acting like the 'quality' kind of people I knew I needed to hang around with, and I had really difficult money problems," Jewellee said.

She cried almost every day. As Jewellee said, she never felt more alone in her life than during that period of her life. It was affecting her job and her Arabic classes. Suad noticed, and she was always there to listen. She gave her the best advice.

"She told me that if I just submitted myself to God completely, He would take away all the pain and loneliness I was feeling. That was on a Thursday. That night, I asked God to help me, when I woke up the next day I felt completely relieved of all my pain. I could say, "God will take care of it," out loud and mean it, Jewellee said.

Spending that weekend talking to Suad about Islam, Jewellee learned that she knew more about Islam than she thought! On Sunday, she did her *Shahadah* at an Islamic Women's Group meeting. The next Friday, after the noon prayer, she did her open *Shahadah* at the Masjid Al-Hijrah in Falls Church, Virginia.

Ramadan started shortly after that, and she went to Makkah for

Umrāh during the last 10 days of the holy month. "It has been the best thing I ever did in my life and I have never looked back," Jewellee said.

How does she feel now?

"My experiences with Islam have shown me that if you follow God's direction (awkward to call it law because it's much more than that) you will have everything you need and often what you want. *In Sha Allah*. Faith in Allah is the best advantage anyone could even give themselves," Jewellee concluded.^[1]

Jewellee



In Search of Truth

Josephine Ivy Janeezko became a role model for me because of her conversion and a strong convictions about Islam. As a new Muslim, she faces many challenges. Josie practises Islam not only in her heart but also in her mannerisms and dress. She is beaming with joy to be fully covered and is completely comfortable with her choice to practise her religion openly. Her struggle, however, lies with her family. Here is her story.

Josephine was born in Selkirk, Manitoba. Her father is Polish and her mother is Ukrainian. She has two older sisters and one older brother. Josie is a newly converted Muslim and lives alone. I met Josie for the first time in the Muslim Students Prayer room on University of Manitoba Campus. I was impressed by the way she was totally absorbed in prayer at her lunch break. She was not eating her lunch. Later talking with her, she mentioned that the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* of

^[1] *Young Muslim Digest*

Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) motivated her to become a Muslim. She loves Islam, and being Islamic, her knowledge about Islam astonished me. I am born Muslim, and yet she appeared to have greater knowledge than I.

If someone had asked her three years ago what she wanted to do with her life, her answer would not have included conversion to Islam. She was amazed that she embraced Islam because for years she felt that she only needed to practice what was in her heart. Josie explains, "I didn't see a need for anything else, and I certainly was not searching for God in my life. In fact, I remember many times picking up literature to read, and as soon as I saw the word "God", I would immediately put the book or magazine away. I was not interested! But I was very interested in seeking the truth. As it turned out, truth led me to God [Allah]."

Reading The Qur'an:

She recalls when she read the *Qur'an* for the first time, she was visiting friends. While they were assembling a computer table, she noticed the *Qur'an* on their bookcase. She took it off the shelf and started to read. As she states, "I started to randomly read the Scripture along with related commentary. I became totally consumed. Two hours quickly passed by and still I wanted more. I felt that this book was like no other in that the author was addressing on a very personal level. I was anxious to have my own copy and later obtained a copy from my friends. I subsequently became aware of the *Hadith* of Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Again, I became consumed by what I was reading, and knew in my heart that the teachings of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) were the truth."

After discovering what Islam truly is, she was at a crossroad in her life. Her gut feeling was that if she turned away from Islam

she would be turning a way from her true self but the nagging question in her mind was, "would my family approve of it?" She made the decision to become Muslim. The ironic part of her conversion was that she was a Muslim before she realized it. She mentions that "I was reading Qur'an regularly and praying 5 times a day. I even attempted to fast a few days during the month of Ramadan. What I was doing was perfecting my practice before my conversion."

Initially, Josie thought the prayer and fasting would be a bit excessive for her, but when she started to pray and fast as required, she received many hidden blessings and now she strongly believes that these exercises are required in order to shape her into the best possible person she can be. She states, "Instead of obeying my whims and desires, I obey my Creator who knows me and loves me, and I trust that He will bless me with whatever is best for me. Now, I find the demands of Islam, such as fasting in the Holy Month of Ramadan, and the 5 daily Prayers, are not excessive or unreasonable in any way because I believe that whatever commands Allah imposes on us are perfect, the only problem is our limited knowledge."

She was really in awe of the religion, and in this state of mind, she thought that her family would feel the same way. Her family became aware of her conversion in April, 1996 when she was living in Abbotsford, British Columbia. She says, "I told my older sister, Dianne who in turn told the rest of my family. My parents were upset at first and could not understand my choice but did not take my decision seriously. They assured themselves that "Islam" was just a phase I was going through and that everything would be back to normal again once I returned to Winnipeg. In the meantime, if the subject of religion was discussed over the phone, we would stop talking about it to avoid any arguments. As a result, I had very few discussions with my family about Islam."

In July 1996, she informed her parents that she would be attending a religious conference in Los Angeles. Her parents became quite concerned. They thought that she would marry a Muslim from a foreign country and move to that country, where she would be oppressed and never heard of again. Somehow, they felt that she would be kidnapped. She felt frustrated because the purpose of her attending this conference was to acquire more knowledge, not get married.

Involvement:

In September of 1996, she returned to Winnipeg and subsequently got a job in the Human Resources Department at the University of Manitoba. She observes, "I was very happy to be back in Winnipeg close to my family. I started to involve myself in the Muslim community in order to practice Islam comfortably. Living as a Muslim in Abbotsford was very difficult for me because the Muslim community is small and Muslims who I became acquainted with and needed for support lived in Vancouver. No one in Abbotsford knew that I was a Muslim except the family from whom I had obtained a Qur'an."

Although she was confident with her choices, she will never forget her first Christmas as a new Muslim, with her family. She remembers, "My Dad looked at me across the dinner table, not saying one word to me, but looking at me in a way that only fathers can look at their children in order to make them feel bad (Feeling bad meant tears welling up in my eyes and choking on all the emotions stirring up inside of me in silence). My Dad could not understand why I would betray him. There are many places in the Qur'an which state that one should treat his / her parents with kindness and love because of the hardships they endured while raising children. To know that I had hurt my Dad was next to unbearable."

Confrontation:

Eight months quickly passed and she felt she was making progress with her family despite a few ups and downs. She was now able to excuse herself for prayers without discomfort during visits. However, she states "there seemed to be an unspoken tug of war between my sister and me for my soul. Her friend and her friend's cousin took me out for lunch on my birthday. Later on that evening the cousin called me into her room and started to discuss Christianity. It was most uncomfortable for me; I felt betrayed because the whole day they made me feel that it was my special day. It now became apparent to me that a possible motive behind this gathering was to entice me away from my faith. I want to stress that I know my sister loves me and that, in her mind, she was doing what she felt was right. I recall my sister telling me she was so worried that I would go to hell not acknowledging Jesus. What she failed to understand was that the Prophet Jesus (may peace be upon him!) is just as important in Islam as all the Prophets mentioned in the Old and New Testaments."

This past year, she was able to enjoy the Christmas break with her family. Although shortly before December 25, 1997, she could not resist the urge any longer to wear *Hijab*. On Christmas Day her father took one look at her and said, "You are not my daughter." Her mother said, "Do I know you?" Her sister could not even acknowledge that she was wearing it, and her brother wished her Happy *Hanukkah* and told her to remove the tablecloth from the head. Although, it appeared that she had ruined their Christmas once again, she felt strong enough to handle all their comments and emotions because she was wearing her *Hijab* for the sake of Allah and none else.

Once it became clear to her family that Islam was her way of life, then they came to terms with it. At the present time, her family can, generally speaking, tolerate her practicing her

religion. They now possess some knowledge about Islam and feel less threatened by it.

A Long-Term Decision:

Her decision to be a Muslim is a long-term decision and she intends to practice Islam for the rest of her life. It took her approximately 2 years to openly practice and she thanks God that she has reached this stage. She is making arrangements to go on *Hajj* this April which is a religious duty for those who can afford it. She admits that Allah has opened so many doors for me and I can't praise Allah enough for this.

Islam made her realize that there is a great purpose to life. Which is to worship Allah with no partners. She is a person who feels at peace in her heart and desires only to please Allah. She says: "I have no true desire for material things. As a result, I conduct my affairs to please Allah and those questions which use to nag my soul are gone. Instead of asking why a particular thing happens to me, or why can't such and such happen, I say, *Alhamdulillah* — Praise be to Allah! As a practicing Muslim, I understand that Allah owns the earth and everything in it, gives of His bounty to whomever He pleases or withholds it from whomever He pleases. My feeling is that too many material things tie a person down and distract them from their true nature, i.e. to worship Allah. Islam reminds me that man is created from a humble beginning and for a humble ending. Man's life, therefore, should also be humble; this can be attained by following Islam. Islam invited me to a world of different cultures and flavors. Islam made me realize that all people are equal, regardless of background, race, color or social status.

View of Islam:

In terms of other people's perceptions of her, she has found that Islam is viewed as a fundamentalist religion. Generally,

Muslims are seen as terrorists and oppressors of women. The stigma does not bother her as much as people's misconceptions about Islam. She states that "I am concerned because I know what my culture (western people) believe about Islam is not true. I feel defensive when I see Muslim bashing on the news and media hype on how Muslims are terrorising the world. The world through news hype, is taught to fear Islam because of lack of knowledge about it. Muslim are actually taught to live in peace; the word "Islam" in Arabic means peace. Although it troubles me that so many people have several misconceptions about Islam. I feel that this is a struggle (Personal *Jihad*) I am willing to participate with my heart and soul. If we do not educate people, those misconceptions will never cease, and so I am willing to help people understand what Islam truly is."

Regarding the oppression of women in Islam, she believes that Islam does the opposite: Islam liberates women. She discovered that women have more rights in Islam than in any other religion. She notes that Prophet Muhammad's wife was a business woman and his daughter was a nurse and scholar. A woman can choose to either work or to stay at home to raise the children. If she does choose to work, then she can keep all her earnings, while her husband must maintain the household financially. Furthermore, household duties are shared between husband and wife. They are equal in the home and not slaves to one another. There are also certain rights afforded to women in divorce. If the marriage is not amicable, she can divorce her husband and if the husband wants to divorce his wife, he must divorce her with kindness and financial support.

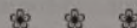
Furthermore, in Islam, it is recommended that a woman keep her last name, in order to carry on the family name with honor. On the other hand, if she wishes she can take the name of her

husband. This misconception about Islam troubled Josie very much.

Josie states, "I felt disheartened when someone, who researched Islam for the purpose of teaching it, mentioned to me that Islam is a patriarchal religion where men are dominant over women. This statement contradicts Islam. In my discussion with her, I found out that this person did not include in her research the Qur'an and Hadith of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) which contain the fundamental teachings of Islam. In my mind, what she researched were people's personal views only. I asked if she would like some information on the subject. With her permission, I gave her a pamphlet explaining the status of women in Islam".

After reading Josie's story, you should be able to better understand her struggle, between her search for truth, her faith, and her family. She is determined to uphold her new faith and still maintains ties with her family. Only Allah knows if Josie's parents will ever come to terms with her conversion or if she will be able to continue as the same sister, and daughter, despite her different religion. What is clear is that Josie's struggle is an example and encouragement for all new converts to Islam or for those struggling with their faith.¹¹

Josephine Ivy Janeczko



¹¹ Courtesy: *Da'wah Highlights* (Islamabad), August 2000. (Rabi-ul-Thani/Jamadi ul Awwal, 1421). Vol. XI. No. VIII. pages 29-35

Religion of New Millennium!

'I have left every thing to Allah! He will protect me to the last!'

These are the soul-inspiring words of Dr. Mrs. Madhavikutty alias Kamala Das, now Dr. Kamala Surayya who is an exciting figure in the current history of Islam. She entered the fold of Islam on December 11, 1999 in Kochi while inaugurating a seminar. It is worthy to note that it took her 27 years to make up her mind before announcing her decision regarding embracing Islam.

It is also worth mentioning that her desire to teach two blind Muslim Children namely Irshad Ahmad and Imtiaz Ahmad brought her close to Islam. She had to study Islamic Scriptures before teaching them. It will not be out of place to mention that one of them is working as a professor in Darjeeling and the other as a Barrister in London.

As regards her acceptance of Islam, she accepted it willingly without any compulsion. She spent 27 years in studying thoroughly and deeply the Islamic teachings and she did so by conviction. In the Holy Qur'an (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2:256-257) Allah the Almighty Says:

"Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error; whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most Trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things.

God is the Protector of those who have faith. From the depths of darkness He leads them forth into Light. Of those who reject faith the patrons are evil ones: from light they will lead them forth into the depths of darkness. They will be Companions of the Fire, to dwell

therein (for ever)."

While giving an example of her 'experience of Islam', she says: "Just like Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him!) she took a lesson from the sun rising and setting, a sign of God for the men of understanding. Recently, I was travelling in a car from the Malabar to Kochi. I started the Journey at 5.45 a.m. I looked at the rising sun. Surprisingly, it had the colour of a setting sun. It travelled with me and at 7 a.m. it turned white. For years I have been looking for signs telling me when to convert. Finally, I got the message."

It is crystal clear as broad day-light that Allah, the Creator of the Universe, guided her to the 'Straight Path' and He will protect her to the last as He protects the whole of mankind!^[1]

With four qualities — patience, perseverance, courage and forgiveness — essential for the *Da'wah* work, the Muslim *Ummah* has yet to make Dr. Kamala Surayya's dream of making *Islam the religion of the New Millennium*, a reality, observes Muhammad Faheem.

If the pen is mightier than the sword, how can actions speak louder than words? None but Mrs. Madhavikutty alias Kamala Das (67) has the answer to this question. It does not matter she had penned down in praise of the *Sangh Parivar*, her act — *conversion to Islam* — has overshadowed her writings. Outside her home, the nameplate bears a new name — Dr. Kamala Surayya.

She has enough wits to respond to the backlash generated after the announcement of her decision to come the fold of Islam, while inaugurating a seminar in Kochi on December 11, 1999.

Dr. Surayya was born at Punnayoorukulam, Thrissur district. Her mother Nalapat Balamaniamma was a famous poetess, while

^[1] Courtesy: *Yaqeen International*, February 7, 2000. Vol.48, No. 19 pages 210-212

her father. Later Mr.V.M. Nair was the Managing Editor of *Mathrubhoomi* and Nalappat *Balamani Amma*. Her husband, Late Mr. Madhava Das was the Senior Consultant of International Monetary Fund (IMF).

She had served as the Poetry Editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, President of *Kerala Children's Film Society*, Chairperson of Kerala Forestry Board and Orient Editor of *Poet Monthly*.

Her works in English are *Summer in Calcutta*, *Alphabet of the Lust*, *The Descendants*, *Old Play House* and *Collected Poems*. Her '*Ente Katha*' has been translated into 15 foreign languages. '*Only The Soul knows How To Sing*' was published in 1996.

She was awarded *Asian Poetry Prize* in 1964 (The Sirens), *Kent Award* in 1965 (Summer in Calcutta), *Asain World Prize* and *Academy Award* (Collected Poems).

A bilingual writer and poetess in Malayalam and English, Dr. Surayya, with quite a few honorary doctorates to her credit, sprang a surprise across Kerala, with applause and criticism both coming from all directions.

In an interview to *The Times of India* on December 15, she threw down a gauntlet to the so-called champions of women emancipation and empowerment, by declaring that it was *Purdah* which attracted her most. "I like the *Purdah* which Muslim Women wear. I like the orthodox lifestyle of Muslim Women," she said in no ambiguous terms. "*Purdah* is a wonderful dress. No man ever makes a pass at a woman in *Purdah*. It provides her with a sense of security."

It is *Purdah* which the Westcultured people look down upon and term it as a mark to oppression, narrow-mindedness and barbarism. It is *Purdah* which is considered to be symbol of ignorance and backwardness of the Muslim women. It is *Purdah* which is alleged to be standing in the way to progress and advancement of the Muslim women. Those who fail to

comprehend the Divine Wisdom behind the *Purdah* should open their eyes as it has now influenced an intellectual mind, i.e., that of Dr. Kamala Das.

It should be an eye-opener even for those Muslims who force their women to doff the *Purdah*. Under the spell of Westernism, they look upon the veil as an unwanted thing and vauntingly discard it. They fail to understand that allowing the women to doff *Purdah* goes contrary to the injunctions laid down by their religion. Such modern Muslims put forward the Qur'anic Verse: "*And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest and to display their adornment except that which is apparent*" (Surat An-Nur, 24:31) in connection with *Satr* (certain parts of body) as per which a woman can uncover her face, hands and feet before others. These modernists fail to differentiate between the covering of *Satr* and *Hijab*. The former is observed before members of the family while the latter before strange persons.

To Dr. Surayyan, *Purdah* grants protection. She is not in need of the freedom which the West-cultured people wish to grant the women with lustful eyes, ogle them, and give them sops to buoy up their lifestyle. In Delhi alone, most of the offices have a women worker to comfort the customers with her melodious voice. In the recently-held book fair at Pragati Maidan, female models in seminude were installed as statues so as to attract and allure more and more visitors. The ogles thronged such venues and were in a hurry to touch their body. What a shame! A woman's body has become a commodity to popularise products.

Such people are spearheading a ceaseless battle against the advocates of *Purdah* to "emancipate the women" from the slavery of *Purdah* in order that she may "march with the times" by exposing her body to the vulgar gaze of the strangers.

Protection of Freedom

What Surayya needs is protection. Protection of the freedom she enjoys. "I don't want freedom. I had enough of it. Trust on me. Freedom had become a burden for me. I want guidelines to regulate and discipline my life. I want a Master to protect me. I want protection and not freedom. I want to be subservient to Allah. In fact, for the past 24 years, I had worn *Purdah* off and on. I had gone to markets, matinee shows and even while abroad I had worn a *Purdah*. I have several of them. A woman in *Purdah* is respected. No one touches you or teases you, if you wear one. You get total protection" she said.

In a society, where incidents of eve-teasing are on the increase, molestation in offices goes unabated, promotion is done only after a female employee entertains her boss, rape incidents are taking an alarming trend, what a woman needs is nothing but protection of her freedom.

Tenets of Islam

"Now let us consider freedom. The tenets of Islam offer full freedom to women. They are treated with equality. Curbs on freedom are there only in those societies where these tenets are ignored. I don't consider a woman's submission to her husband and other higher powers as lack of freedom. I've had enough of such freedom and I don't want it any more. I have totally submitted myself to Allah. I am happy to observe His rules and conditions," she said.

According to her, Islam is the only religion which really recognises the dignity and prominence of women whereas she had not found that in the Hindu religion in which she was born.

Dr. Surayya took 27 years to make up her mind before announcing her decision. Her consultation with husband in the early seventies and the latter's thoughtful advice to read books

on Islam points to a healthy understanding between both of them. Neither her husband nor children pressured her to beat a retreat. Rather, they extended a helping hand to her. Now all her three sons have reached Kochi to face unitedly the threats held out by fanatics. "We have no disagreement with her decision. She is our mother whether she is a Hindu or Christian or Muslim. We would be with her all the time," said one of her sons. "They say if it pleases me, they too are ready to change their religion," she discloses.

Threats to Life

She has totally ignored the threats. "I have left every thing to Allah. He will protect me to the last," she said. For her, "God has no definite form. God is an Unseen Power. Anybody can call it by any name."

Her son M. D. Nalappad, former editor of *Mathrubhumi* and former resident editor of *The Times of India* in Bangalore, said that they received a number of threatening telephone calls, apparently from Hindu extremists. One caller threatened that he would kill her within 24 hours.

Instead, she is overwhelmed by the support, love and compassion coming from the Muslim community. "My feeling that Islam is a religion of love and compassion has been proved right. I have been getting calls from almost all the Muslim countries extending support to me... My next foreign trip will be to Makkah. I want to kiss the soil in Madinah," she said in another interview.

In the press, she was also alleged to have stated that she was taking away the Hindu god, Krishna from the Guruvayoor temple to make him Muhammad. However, she defended that she had not visited the temple for the last 14 years. "I went there once as a nurse to my mother. My sole purpose was to accompany her and help her," she remarked.

History stands testimony to the fact that Islam was never spread by forcible means. Since Independence of India, thousands of people have changed over to Islam without facing any kind of fear. Rather, attempts were made to prevent people from embracing Islam and impose upon them non-Islamic culture and doctrines against their wishes. The threats to Dr. Kamala Das are not new happenings, but whosoever dares to abandon one's Birth religion to embrace Islam has to confront them.

Surprisingly, her desire to teach two blind Muslim children Irshad Ahmed and Imtiaz Ahmed brought her close to Islam. She had to study Islamic scriptures before teaching them. "One is working as a Professor in Darjeeling and another as a Barrister in London," she says.

Divine Signs

Just like Prophet Ibrahim (may peace be upon him!), she took a lesson from the sun rising and setting, a sign of God for the men of Understanding. "Recently, I was travelling in a car from the Malabar to Kochi. I started the journey at 5:45 a.m. I looked at the rising sun. Surprisingly, it had the colour of a setting sun. It travelled with me and at 7 a.m. it turned white. For years I have been looking for signs telling me when to convert. Finally, got the message," she observed.

She now plans to write poems on Allah. "Allah is the fountainhead of love and compassing. I will write about that. I have already written three poems on Allah I will write more soon and bring out a compilation before the end of next year," she hopes.

She is against the Hindu way of cremating the dead. "I do not want my body to be burnt. I do not want my successors to offer *pindam* and believe that after death, I will appear in the form of a crow," she asserts.

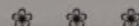
She also plans to learn more about the Qu'ran and about the things that a good Muslim is expected to do "I understand that a good Muslim should help others. I have been doing so and I am keen to continue it. I don't want to keep money. I want to give part of what I have earned to others."

Religion of New Millennium

"I would like to make this religion of the new millennium. I will tell people the virtues of this religion and share the happiness I experienced after embracing Islam. I have no word to explain the contentment I feel now. I have never felt such happiness in my life. I feel loved and protected. I am an old person. I want this love and protection. Money cannot bring such happiness. I don't want money," she clarified.

Islam is the religion of all eras. It has to surpass all other false beliefs and ideologies. Muslims need to be prepared to begin the new millennium with firm faith in Allah and love for Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) to make the Truth widely known to each and every one and root out the domination of falsehood from the surface of earth. With four qualities — patience, perseverance, courage and forgiving — essential for the *Da'wah* work, the Muslim *Ummah* has yet to make Dr. Kamala Surayya's dream of making *Islam the Religion of the New Millennium*, a reality.^[1]

Dr. Kamala Surayya



^[1] Courtesy: *Yaqeen International*, February 7, 2000. Vol.48, No. 19 pages 210-212

The Hijab

The women interviewed stressed how comfortable they felt wearing *Hijab*, how it made them feel good about themselves, and brought them a feeling of inner peace.

The furore over the expulsion in 1995 of Quebec High school students who refused to remove their head-scarves, with some people declaring the *Hijab* might not be considered proper Canadian dress, demonstrates that the West has not yet transcended the negative stereotype of the oppressed, veiled Muslim woman which was generated during the period of Western colonization of the Middle East. Indeed, Muslim women in the West are still discriminated against based upon these myths. The aim of this paper is to bring the perspective of some Muslim women who cover willingly into the debate over *Hijab*.

Muslim women in *Hijab* are regularly told by Canadians "This is Canada. You're free here. You don't have to wear that thing on your head." Nur, a university student, discovered one day that this view of *Hijab* can lead people to be quite hostile. At the university one day, a woman angrily approached her, asking why Nur was dressed like that, bringing herself so much attention, and bringing backwardness to Canada, when feminists had worked so hard for the cause of women for the last twenty years.

When asked to explain why they covered, the women I interviewed said they believed that in the Qur'an Allah commanded women to cover their hair, and that Prophet statements backed that up. For them, *Hijab* symbolizes, not oppression or terrorism, as it does in mainstream western discourse, but "purity", "modesty", a "women's Islamic

identity", and obedience, or submission to God and a testament that you're Muslim." Halima, a convert to Islam, adds that *Hijab* symbolizes "the woman's power's to take back her own dignity and her own sexuality."¹¹

Traditional Interpretation

The women I interviewed are aware of feminist arguments that they are being duped by an anti-woman interpretation of the Qur'an. However, they reject this suggestion, and in so doing demonstrate they do not follow Qur'anic Verses blindly. They have considered various interpretations of the Qur'an, and chosen that which made most sense to them. They are not, as conventional wisdom in the West suggests, duped women following the dictates of men. They all believed that the Qur'anic Verse asking women to cover their hair is straightforward. Nadia captures the women's position well: "I have to say that when I read the *Ayat* (Verse) that says take your head-dress and put it over your bosom (*Surat An-Nisa*, 24:30-31). It's pretty clear to me that there is an assumption that you're wearing a head-dress, and that's part of the Islamic dress. I mean why didn't He (Allah) just say 'wear a high neck collar?' {laughs} You know, if it was your bosom that was the important thing then why wasn't there more stress on, um, you know put a button in the top of your shirt, or something. I dunno. Or make sure your bosom is covered, or um, that kind of thing." Raneem, a convert to Islam, added that even if *Hijab* was just a cultural thing, "it's a good thing to do."

Why Hijab?

Westerners are often puzzled to see Muslim women covering

¹¹ Courtesy: *Islamic Horizons*, Vol. 27, No. 2; No. 2; March-April 1998. Pages 48-50. It is based on the interviews taken by sister Katherine Bullock, a revert to Islam since 1994, who is a Doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto, Canada. — Editor.

their bodies more than Muslim men do, and see that as a proof of the woman's inferior status. Islam lays out a dress code for both male and female believers, but the requirements for covering are different: a man is to cover from navel to knee, and wear opaque, loose clothing (tight jeans are out of the question); women cover more, everything but face and hands. All of the women I interviewed believe that these differences are due to inherent differences between men and women. They say that men are more easily turned on sexually than are women. The point to covering is not that sexual attraction is bad, only that it should be expressed between a husband and wife inside the privacy of home. A public space free of sexual tensions is seen as a more harmonious and peaceful place for human beings, men and women, to interact, do business, and build a healthy civilization. These women see *Hijab* as a benefit to society, as a protection for women, and as a source of inner peace. Several women, especially converts who started covering in their twenties, felt men, even non-Muslim men, approached them more respectfully, did not try to flirt with them or make "leering" comments, and treated them as 'persons' not 'sex-objects.' Halima also pointed out that male-female interactions were based on more than just the clothes: *Hijab* is a mode of decorous behavior as well, "when you're covered, you're not going to be a flirtatious person." My interviewees reject the feminist argument that women should not care how their dress affects men. They reply that Muslim women and men are brothers and sisters in faith, and find nothing wrong in helping men practice their faith better. As Zainab, a convert to Islam, said: "women have been exploited so much, and men make such silly fools of themselves over women, that I really think it's a good thing for the men, that women wear *Hijab*. Why encourage jealousy or envy or anything like that? Why encourage the negative emotions?"

Equality

Many feminists argue that to believe in male-female differences is to accede to women's oppressions, because it is these differences which have been used to stop women from realizing their potentials. The Muslim women in the survey do not agree that believing in male-female differences is to believe women and men are equal; they all believe that men and women are different, and that women and men are equal in Islam. For these women, the principal definition of equality is how human beings are in relation to Allah.

The Qur'an unequivocally states that men and women are equal in the eyes of Allah. Men and women were created from a single soul, and are both the trustees of Allah on earth (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2:30), individually responsible and accountable for their actions. However, these women do not believe that male/female differences include traditional western notions of men being more rational or intelligent than women. In addition, the women were not of the opinion that woman's child-bearing nature meant she could not be in the workforce, and nor did they believe that a man's duty to support his family financially meant that he should not do household chores. The women referred back to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!), who used to mend his clothes, sweep his house, and perform other chores. The view that men and women have inherent differences is a source of the conflicting understanding of women's position in Islam between the West and my interviewees.

They argue that equality does not have to mean sameness, and criticize western presumptions that if men and women are not doing something in an identical manner they must be unequal. Nor do the women believe that *Hijab* hinders their freedom, rather *Hijab* is seen as a device to facilitate Muslim women's movements outside the home. Nadia expresses the sentiment

well: "I Kinda see *Hijab* the opposite way [from being a sign of constraint]. I Kinda think that if you've covered yourself Islamically, then there wouldn't be a reason for you to stay home. I mean that was the whole point, that you've removed the things that's made you attractive, you've removed the attention to yourselves, so now you're out there to do your business, based on who you are; I mean what you have to say and what you're going to contribute and not what you look like, and that kind of thing. "The women argue that the idea that *Hijab* means women should not go outside is contradicted by the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!); during his life-time women were very actively involved in the community, in business, in fighting wars, in scholarship and so on. An aspect of *Hijab* that came through strongly in the interviews was how wearing *Hijab* gives these women sources of inner strenght and a high level of confidence and self-esteem. For example, men and women learn from an early age that women (all of them) are beautiful, and that is a reason they cover. That message is good for women's self-esteem, as well as for the way men think about women. The message compares favorably to that of the West where we see anorexia and bulimia on the increase as young women attempt to reach an unattainable ideal of female beauty.

Many women stressed how comfortable they felt wearing *Hijab*, how it made them feel good about themselves, and brought them a feeling of inner peace. Ellen, a convert to Islam, stresses that in *Hijab* she feels like I am doing something to please Allah, you know it makes you feel good about yourself. You feel different in a good way, because you're not exposing yourself and you know, you're not exposed to many things like you would be if you're not convering."

Muslim women in the West who cover, suffer daily indignities

from the people around them because of the way they dress. The western image that they are oppressed, or represent a terrorist religion makes it difficult of them to be accepted easily by the Canadian community. Because Islam is not well understood in the West, some converts, also have problems with their families, friends and colleagues about becoming Muslim and about wearing *Hijab*. Other women face opposition from their own (Muslim) families as well, in their decision to cover. This is because in many Muslim countries, the West has been seen as the model to imitate in order to 'progress,' and they tried to shed Islam and all that was associated with it. *Hijab* is associated with something 'backward,' 'low-class' people do, or as something only old women do. Many see *Hijab* as ugly and as reducing the chances for a young woman to get married. Muslims who grow up in Canada often object to *Hijab*, taking on the western perception of the meaning of *Hijab*. Several of the women (born Muslims) in this study had battled families in order to cover. And yet, many of the women I interviewed, stressed that overall they did not get too many hostile reactions and some of them also experienced positive reactions from non-Muslims. They think that Toronto is so multicultural that people are used to seeing all different kinds of dress.

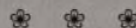
Sometimes Muslim women have problems with people in situations where their identity is really irrelevant to the situation at hand. Zainab has been a patient in a hospital and had her doctor tell her she should not have embraced Islam because she became a "second class citizen." He asked her "don't you know how badly the women are treated in Islam?" Rania, who is a doctor, finds sometimes patients will interrupt their visit to her to ask her "Where is she from?" Or why is she "dressed like that?" Rania said that she finds that "there's the time to explain and then there's the time to just give a brief answer and go on to other things and let's talk about why you're

here, and I'm the doctor and you're the patient okay?"

Given these kinds of negative reactions to *Hijab*, it is not surprising that many Muslims try to hide their Islamic identity. The pressure for Muslims to assimilate to the ways of the West is great. Safiyah is under such pressure from her husband to "look Canadian." He did not seem to mind that she wore *Hijab* in Algeria, but in their first six months in Canada, so many people stared at them, that he felt uncomfortable with her in *Hijab*. Although the staring didn't bother Safiyah, her husband has successfully pressured her to stop covering. The women I interviewed referred to Canada as a multi-cultural and multi-faith society in a positive way, and appreciate the liberty and protection Canadian law gave them to practice their religion as any other group can. They thought as does Halima: "if Canada boasts you can practice your religious freedom of thought and beliefs, if a woman believes she should wear her *Hijab* why shouldn't she? She's not hurting anybody. I mean if people can go down Yonge Street [a popular Toronto haunt] almost naked, why should her putting a scarf on her head bother people, even for that matter wearing a veil on face, why should that upset somebody?" Muslim women want non-Muslims to think that *Hijab* is a respectable thing, not degrading or "oppressive." They like to be seen just as an ordinary person who deserves to be respected. Raneem said, "Just take me as I am you know, like they should accept me for who I am, not for the way I look and that goes for everybody." Halima was clear in her views. She said, "I would like them to respect our choice and not exclude women who wear *Hijab* from certain things [like] in Quebec [...] I mean this is truly oppression, they say the woman is oppressed because she's wearing the *Hijab*, but the true oppression is preventing somebody from going to school because they have a scarf on their head, the larger issue is we'd like everybody to know about Islam so more people would accept it." Sadia said her *Hijab* should tell others, "That I'm a

Muslim, so I want them to know that, I'm doing this because I'm obeying Allah, and it's a free country and I can do what I want. And that I don't care if I'm accepted by them or not, I'm going to do it anyway."

Katherine Bullock



My story from Christianity to Islam

This is a 'Reversion to Islam' story of sister Khadija Zafar from Washington, U.S.A. She was a staunch and firm believer in Christianity. Her previous name was Teresita and she hails from the Philippines. Her parents and her whole family are devoted Catholics.

She has one son who is also a revert to Islam. He followed the excellent example of her mother and entered the fold of Islam at the age of 9. After 11 years of marriage, which ended in 1992, sister Khadija was overwhelmed by dark clouds and was feeling quite distressed. One day, she met an Afghan family and grew close to it. As a result, she became acquainted with Islamic Culture and Civilization.

She also grew nearer to the Islamic way of life while watching them practicing it. She was influenced by the way of worship and the belief in one God and His Messenger Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). She held heated discussions and spent hours talking about the merits and demerits of Islam and Christianity. She was of the view that Christianity was the only way to salvation while

the Afghan family insisted that Islam was the only way to salvation and entering Paradise. At last, she decided to study Islam for herself and understand its Message.

She got a translation of the Holy Qur'an and started studying it without break even though she wanted an interval, but to her amazement she could not stop reading. She was overwhelmed by its simplicity and charm. She felt as if the Holy Qur'an was alive and speaking to her directly.

After a few days, sister Khadija visited the Afghan family and told them of her intention of embracing Islam. Without any hesitation and in their presence, she uttered *Shahadah*, i.e. "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger." On this sacred happening, they were all overjoyed. In this way Allah guided her to the 'Right path'. Following the excellent example of her mother her son also declared *Shahadah*. Now-a-days, she has devoted herself for the *Dawah* and 'Propagation' of Islam. It is worth mentioning that due to her efforts, a large number of them have entered the fold of Islam.

We feel much pleasure in presenting her convincing and thought-provoking story for the benefit of our esteemed readers — Editor.

No one could have ever imagined me make such a decision! Even in my wildest dreams looking back five years, I could not have foreseen this turn of events. Those who knew me uttered in disbelief, "*Teresita converted to Islam? What got into her?*". My decision devastated my parents and my entire family—all of whom were devoted Catholics from the Philippines — and caused me to lose all my friends. However, Allah had opened my heart and made me realize that I had been worshipping a false deity; there was simply no tuning back. This is the story of my conversion to Islam.

After 11 years of marriage which ended in 1992, my life was filled with black clouds. Everything seemed to be falling apart. Raising a young boy all alone was not easy and I often sought help of our Lord. I tried to distract myself by being around friends, spending time with my son, or just keeping busy at work; but, that did not change my feeling of loneliness and loss. Then, one day I met and befriended an Afghan family. I spent most of my free time with them and became acquainted with their culture and their delicious food. Yet, what I found most intriguing was their devotional worship and belief in God and His Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!).

As a firm Christian, I furiously debated with them and stated that Christianity was the only way to salvation, but they insisted that Islam is the way to everlasting paradise. We spent hours discussing the merits of one religion over another and at the end of these friendly debates, we felt exhausted and reached nowhere. Finally, I decided to study Islam for myself and understand the message of the religion which instigated such devoted faith from my friends.

I obtained an English translation of the Qur'an and began reading through the chapters of the Book. To my amazement, I was unable to stop reading and went on for hours. I found the Qur'an very simple clear and easy to understand. I began to experience an overwhelming sense of upliftment and rejuvenation; it was simply wonderful. It felt almost like the Qur'an was alive and speaking directly to me. I experienced an inner change and knew that things would never be the same.

A few days later, I visited my Afghan friends with my copy of the Qur'an and told them of my intention of becoming a Muslim. Well, knowing now, the first pillar of Islam is *Shahadah* (to proclaim belief in God and His Messenger) Which I sincerely uttered "*La ilaha ilalla, Muhammada Rasul Allah*", in

their presence. They were all so happy about my decision that even grandmother (as I called her) burst into tears.

Now what? Or what was next? I had no idea how to practice Islam. Due to distance, going over to my Afghan friends to learn Islam was not every convenient. I checked out the phone book and looked for a mosque where I could get more information and be religiously involved. I found one with an Islamic library and paid it a visit. The librarian helped me find books that were suitable for beginner and put me in touch with a sister-also from the Philippines-who patiently helped me with my questions. My first Qur'an was now replaced by an Arabic/English text. I started to learn to pray in English and slowly memorized them in Arabic. Then, I started wearing *Hijab* (head scarf) and changed my manner of dressing. Gradually, I began paying attention to the *Halal* (allowed) and *Haram* (forbidden) food.

Seeing the change for the better in me, my son also declared his *Shahadah* and (*Alhamdulillah*) tries to be a good Muslim. the best he could possibly be at age of nine. We started getting involved with our local mosque's activities and obtained more Islamic books and literature which we have studied at home. Since then, I have tried to convey the message of Islam to as many non-Muslims as I can; some of them, even, have become interested and embraced the religion of Truth.

Life is a never ending journey to know God and culminates only after death. My journey has just begun.^[1]

"Whoever receives guidance, receives it for his own benefit; whoever goes astray does so to his own loss. No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another, nor would We visit with Our Wrath until We had sent a Messenger" (*Al-Isra*, 17:15)

Khadija Zafar (Washington, USA)

^[1] Courtesy: *Dawah Highlights* (Islamabad) Vol. 9, No. 6 June 1998, pages 38-39.

Khairunisa dedicates herself for Islam in Germany^[1]

Abbas and Khairunisa Jacobas is a very amiable couple, working with a rare devotion, zeal and energy to disseminate the message of Islam. Both of them were prominent invitees of the Muslim World League during the last year's *Hajj* and we had an opportunity to meet them and elicit some very important information on the Muslim life and the progress of *Dawah* work in Germany.

Mrs. Jacobs embraced Islam more than three decades ago when she first came in contact with the Last Revealed Religion through some Palestinian students while studying at the University of Hamburg. She was highly impressed with the sublime tenets of Islam and found the social and cultural life outlined by it, radically different from her own. At that time she was a 19-year old bank clerk doing voluntary social work. "These students were all poor. I was impressed with the manner in which they shared their meager food amongst each other. That incident opened the doors to Islam for me," she exclaimed.

A former Protestant Lutheran Evangelist, Mrs. Khairunisa Jacobs, who married Abbas Jacobs of Worcester, South Africa, 32 years ago, said following the Qur'an and *Sunnah* has given her peace of mind. Today she and her husband, whom she met in Hamburg in 1960, are active *Dawah* workers in Germany and also operate in other parts of Europe.

Speaking enthusiastically about the prospects of Islam in Germany, Khairunisa said that Islam had grown over the years in her country, including the rapidly increasing number of

^[1] Courtesy: *Saudi Gazette* (K.S.A) Monday January 9, 1995, page 8 also *Riyadh Daily* 13th January, 1995

mosques and Islamic centres. "However, these facilities are not enough for the four million Muslims in Germany of which 80% are Turks and the rest from Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq. But Islam is growing every day. Presently, there are 50,000 Germans who have converted to Islam," she said.

Mrs. Jacobs is a great advocate of the rights of the Muslim women as bestowed on them by the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. She, in her usual emphatic style, says: "Women are the foundation for a disciplined *Ummah* and yet we are too naive about the rights bestowed on us in the Qur'an.

"When women are dressed correctly in the Islamic way this is immediately seen by Western society as a sign of oppression, being uneducated, helpless, backward and family-bound. All these prejudices arise from the fact that the Western media in Europe judges the Muslim women according to Christian-European perceptions," she elaborates. "This assumption that the life of women in Islamic countries is dark and strange without pleasure is the result of Western countries prejudging Islam."

Describing the stereotyped profile of the Muslim woman and showing how Europe looks at and depicts her, Khairunisa says: "In Germany, the Muslim population has increased so rapidly in the last 30 years that western interests have been trying all they can to stop it — so great is their fear of Islam! The reason, therefore, why our media especially chooses the Muslim woman to attack can be found in the fact that more women than men are converting to Islam. Of every 100 Germans that convert to Islam, about 70 are women.

The Western media conveys a picture to the world of the Muslim woman being backward and oppressed. In Contrast to the 'liberated' Western woman, the Muslim is pictured as being passive and patient with a tendency towards fatalistic outbreaks! Another stereotype is that of a luxurious, erotic, jewel encrusted creature from the Harem, languishing in a

perfumed *Thousand and one Nights dream*.

This negative picture of Islam by the West must be appreciated in conjunction with its ignorance about the *Deen*. Then there is the increasing re-Islamisation which is seen as 'fundamentalism' or even 'fatalism' by the West. Although perceived as a 'cultural' revival, the West is quick to condemn it because it is seen to be against new ideas, progress and economic growth.

"In reality, the West fears 'fundamentalism' because it directly threatens the value systems incorporated into Western economics, politics and social norms. Thus, it is viewed with a jaundiced eye that frequently makes references to 'terrorism' and lack of 'human rights.' To the West, the Islamic movement is backward and exploitative of poverty and ignorance with those participating being brainwashed and backward."

Flaying another favourite Western assumption that *Hijab* is an obstacle in the way of woman's participation in society and its development, Mrs. Jacobs says quite emphatically: "Another assumption is that 'fundamentalists' drive their women away from work because of the *Hijab* which is seen as the primary symbol of oppression. It is taken to be a return to the middle-ages and a revolt against progress.

About the popular talk regarding the West's demands on Muslim to adapt to the European way of life, Khairunisa says that this works better in theory than practice. She adds: "Muslims living in Germany are told to adapt to the European way of life, especially the women. Of course, there is much talk about integration and, officially, national or cultural identity is guaranteed. Unfortunately, this works better in theory than practice.

"And what does the *Hijab* mean to me personally? It is not something that cuts me off from the rest of the world, or something that allows me less freedom as is so often assumed in our media. It is also not a sign of feminine weakness or inferiority towards men. It brings order in the social

relationship between man and woman."

"I wear the *Hijab* for Allah: it makes me strong for Islam. The *Hijab* shows me that I am a woman because I am proud to be a woman and most of all, because I am proud to be a mother."

Out of a total population of 80 million, there are 2.5 million German Muslims in the Country. Although so far there are no Muslim deputies in the Bundestag, there are some Muslims in the civil service.

Speaking about her foreign visits, Mrs. Jacobs said that she had been invited to attend the Second Conference of Muslim Woman's Federation in Cape Town, South Africa, plus a six-week tour during which she delivered lectures on Islam in mosques, schools, universities and in factories.

Abbas Jacobs, her husband, informed us that as there was no regular mosque in their town, therefore, they have started holding the congregational prayers in their own house since 1989. The couple organises other Islamic activities also at the same venue. For this, they converted a room in the house, where Abbas delivers Friday *Khutbas* (sermons) to a congregation of 25 worshippers. He first delivers the *Khutba* in German, then translates it in Arabic and frequently in the Bosnian language.

In Germany there are approximately 500 facilities for offering prayers, but only 5 or six mosques in the real sense. *Adhan* (calling for prayers) is not allowed.

Both husband and wife said that although they do not need financial support for their *Dawah* work as they are self-supporting, they badly need the Qur'an, books of *Hadith* and other essential Islamic literature translated in German.^[1]

Muslehuddin Ahamad

^[1] Courtesy: *Muslim World League Journal*

I was never convinced with the concept of 'Trinity' in Christianity!

Madam Khalida Buchanan Hamilton will always be remembered in the annals of British Islamic history for the remarkable services she rendered for the cause of Islam. She was a lady of great calibre and belonged to a high and noble family of London. She was the wife of the Deputy Surgeon General Charles William Buchanan Hamilton of the Royal Navy, a cousin to the first Duke of Abercorn and a nephew of James Buchanan, who was at one time American Ambassador in London and was elected President of the United States of America in 1856. General Hamilton died in the middle of the year 1929 and became a declared Muslim shortly before his death.

Mrs. Hamilton was a standing reply to the Christian charge that Islam recognized no soul in woman. She had a soul no less alive than any Christian man can claim to have.

Mrs. Hamilton embraced Islam in 1929 and had been a very active and enthusiastic member of the Islamic Community.

She was a product of that old time English home discipline, which lent a hallow of dignity to womanhood, made it sacrificing, charitable and sensitive to other's suffering. But she did not allow this tenderness of heart to be tainted by the parochial outlook of the old English Society. She had the Islamic breadth of Social outlook to add glory to her generosity of heart. Rich or poor, whoever among the Eastern Muslims came in contact with her felt, as if she had been a lifelong devoted friend. Her unaffected smile would remove the gloom from the saddest mind groaning under the pressure of insurmountable difficulties.

If her private charity was almost unlimited, her public charities were equally remarkable. She died on 12th January, 1942. It is an admitted fact that the Muslim community in Great Britain suffered a grave loss through her death at Letchworth Herts.

After the death of Lord Headley, Mrs. Hamilton was elected President of the Muslim Society in Great Britain.

But even before her election, she used to give financial help to the Society every time an appeal was made. After her acceptance of Islam, she had devoted her life for the cause of Islam and Muslims.^[1]

There were certain aspects of Christianity of which were not acceptable to Madam Hamilton. She said:

"I was never convinced with the concept of Trinity in Christianity. I could never digest the belief that God could have a Son of Mary. The very creation of Adam out of clay negates the concept of "Trinity"—God, His Son and the Holy Spirit. Christianity is a religion of dogmas."

She believed that the present Christianity is losing ground. She once said:

"Modern Christianity is so hollow and lifeless that no reasonable person is going to accept it as a religion."

Khalida Hamilton



^[1] *Islamic Review*, November 1942, pages 370-71

How did I come to Islam and Why?

Embracing Islam is the most important and beneficial thing that could have happened to me. Praise be to Allah that I was shown His path.

Born in Cambodia, I am a 24 years old Chinese girl. I came to France at the age of four. Mine is a quite traditional Chinese family. On the religious side, my parents are Buddhists, but just by tradition. They are Buddhists for my grandparents are. My parents did not teach me their religion because they are not that strong believers. Besides, they are not regularly practising Buddhism. They cannot explain to me sometimes why they perform such or such rituals. I was not Buddhist but my behaviour was influenced by Buddhism and the moral values conveyed by this philosophy.

I grew up within a Western new generation which disregards anything attached to religion.^[1]

However, I had a rather bad image of Islam which is the main image conveyed in the Western countries. Besides, I had quite a negative vision of religions. According to me, religion should convey strong moral values and sound behaviour. Yet what I saw around me and what I heard from history was very negative, religious wars, religious slaughters (e.g. against Protestants), Religious obscurantism versus science, Islamic fundamentalists and so on.

I realised that Islam was not like the other religions because of its definition: Islam meant "total Submission to God" and Muslim meant "the one who surrenders to God's will." It was not derived from a person nor a people. I really was impressed

^[1] *Radiance View Weekly* 6-12 June, 1999

by the noble criterion of Islam.

Then I got acquainted with the notion of destiny, with the angels with the jinns, with the Day of Judgement. And I learnt how the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). All these discoveries made me point out the mission of man on earth. If there was God, and as we are endowed with a conscience, why should not there be a transcendence between man and God?

When I found the occasion to be alone, I read. I read a book about the three revealed religions. I read extracts from books dealing with religions (of any kind of religions). I read articles about Islam. And I read the book of Maurice Bucaille, *La Bible, le Coran et la Science* which compared the scientific revelations from the Bible and the ones given by the Quran, and latest scientific technological discoveries. This book was quite objective and was written by a French surgeon who went to Saudi Arabia.

I am scientific minded as I am studying science and technology. And I find that this book, which was rewarded by a western organisation is objective, even if I did not verify what the author claimed in it.

So, this reading was decisive for me, it appeared to me that Jesus (may peace be upon him!) did live, that he did do miracles with the power of God. Indeed, I wondered for the first time in my life if Jesus ever existed. I blamed myself to have not asked this before, for I lived in a country whose calendar began with the year of his birth. Why a new calendar just for him and not for a king or an emperor? How a man could have raised such a phenomenon? What had happened? He must have done something very impressive as so many people remembered his name and aimed to follow him.

Then was the same thinking process for the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon

him). I believed that Allah gave the Qu'ran to His creatures through the mission of Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!). I was impressed by the fact that everybody, Muslims and non-Muslims alike agreed that the Qu'ran was written in a very powerful level of Arabic. I was impressed to discover that the Qu'ran, 1400 years ago, revealed scientific facts that could only be proven with our latest technologies (e.g. the embryo development). I did not know that the Qu'ran mentioned the sun's and moon's orbits and others proven scientific facts. For instance, the barrier between salt water and sweet water where a river meets the sea, is mentioned in it. In many Verses, the Qu'ran stresses the importance of water for life on earth. This is completely true.

The idea about the opposition between science and religion did not existed in Islam, whereas it had existed (and still exists?) in Christianity. And I felt surprised that the Qur'an encourages people to use science for discovering the greatness of Allah. Besides, I felt more confident in how the Qur'an was revealed and written (preserved) compared to how it was for the Bible (the Torah and the Gospel). I found its revelation nobler and more secure.

Meanwhile, I acted as if I was a *Muslimah*, I mean, I just avoided eating pork and drinking alcohol. I realised from then on that the deeds of men had confused me on the religion's aim. I knew that should distinguish the religion of Allah from men's deeds. I realised that men's deeds should not prevent me from believing in the message of Allah.

And one evening I took the step on the path of Allah. I was very confused and afraid to make the wrong choice. While crying I prayed to Allah to help me from this unstable state of mind. After a shower I did feel relaxed and calmed down, as if I had never had this hard bearable state of doubts. And from then on, there was no doubt for me any more that I ought to say the

faith profession aloud, and first just for Allah and me, and the angels. I kept this conversion concealed a couple of days then revealed it to my best friend.

First, I had a better image of Islam. I discovered the main pillars of Islam. Several wrong criteria of Islam were erased from my mind.

Then I made the difference between what Allah asked us to do (which was good), and what men could do. After, I think, I understood that God could not let men facing "alone" their responsibility. Men own their conscience, their judgement about good and bad. But God wants to help them by sending Prophets. Indeed, I needed an objective argument to accept that miracles could happen. If we agree that Allah is prefect, he must give us signs (because we are so foolish and weak). After accepting the concept that their was no other deity but Allah alone, I accepted the revelation of the Qur'an for it appeared to me as a miracle. I could have chosen believing in Christianity or Judaism, for these religions were closer to my culture. But I chose Islam for I believed in the miracle of the Qur'an. Besides, I found Islam nobler than the other revealed religions. I disliked statues in Catholic Churches. I disliked the Catholic Church hierarchy, I was confused about Christian Trinity. And I did not understand why one religion should be granted to one people.

Moreover, Islam comes after the two other religions in order to complete them. Well, after realising that Allah could exist, the best solution for me was to follow the religion for me was to follow the religion which seemed the most righteous, despite the deeds of people who belonged to this religion.

Now, I find more and more reasons proving Islam is the truth. Praise be to Allah that He made me choose the right path! I fasted during the month of Ramadhan, a couple of weeks after I decided to be a *Muslimah*. I had just revealed my conversion to a couple of Muslim friends.

Even if I fasted and learnt how to pray, I did not really feel as a *Muslimah*. I was admiring my Muslim brothers and sisters and I found myself ignorant of my new religion that I was too shy to tell them I was a *Muslimah*. But all these first feelings went away gradually!

I began to read the French translation of the Qur'an. At first I was very frightened by this reading. Indeed, there were things that I did not understand and others that I could easily accept. For example, the Verses about the *Houris* in Paradise shocked me.

However, I prayed to Allah to make me understand later what I could not understand at this moment and to calm down my heart and to strengthen my beginning faith. When I went further through the Qur'an, I knew that I was just a human being, and that I should be patient and that I should trust Allah. Allah knows best.

So I was learning by myself just by reading the Qur'an and asking question to my friends. I went once to the mosque with my friends, for evening prayers during the month of Ramdhan. And one night at the end of that month, I dreamed about praying to Allah. That was very strange and fulfilled my heart with contentment.

I was told that a special night existed where angels get down to earth. I felt more and more that I had done the best choice of my life, the best choice that a human being could have done. I felt the need to share my discovery with my family.

But I knew how my relatives were and I did not know how to tell them my conversion. I knew that I should keep this in secret till I knew how to prepare them to this kind of confession. I went to get some advice from the *Imam*, and I was right. Even if I ate pork at my parents' home, even if I could not pray but in my bed, that was the best solution for the moment, I tried to ask my parents about their religion. I wanted to make them sensitive about existential issues which

faith professing angels. I kept revealed it to First, I had a lot of Islam. Seven mind.

Then I made (which was understood the responsibility about good and Prophets. Indeed, miracles could give us signs accepting the alone. I accepted me as a miracle Judaism, for I chose Islam for found Islam in statues in Ca hierarchy, I was understand was Moreover, Islam complete the best solution follow the real the deeds of Now, I find in Praise be to I fasted during I decided to be to a couple of

could lead them to ask the accurate questions about their traditions.

One day, my little sister and little brother told me that I was very peculiar, that I was asking too much useless questions. That made me smile. I felt quite close to my family. I knew that Islam asked us to appreciate the love for our family and to respect our parents. And when I became *Muslimah*, it seemed to me that this love grew greater. And besides, I got more involved in showing that I loved them, my parents, my sister and brothers, my grand-parents, my uncles and aunts.

Two months later, I told them the truth. Indeed, I did not want to lie any longer, and I could not stand seeing them nice with me whereas I was cheating them. I did not bear they would be so nice with me because I changed my mind whereas they were nasty two months before. Thus one Sunday I did not attend the church mass. Hence they saw my lie and my determination. Their reaction was quite violent. I was beaten and cursed. They were all in such anger! My parents were influenced by the other relatives. They told me that I should change my mind otherwise I would not be able to stay at home. I had a few days as a dead-end.

One evening, the situation was so critical that I left home and went to one of my French friends. She was at home that evening and she witnessed what happened. Indeed, the atmosphere was unbearable between me and my whole big family (almost everybody was there). I was afraid to be seriously wounded and I had the feeling that I could not protect and defend myself alone. Besides, I was no longer respected, so whatever I could say, they would not listen.

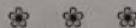
Al-Hamdulillah, God gave me very nice and sensible friends. All along my difficult situation with my family I received support from them, Muslims and non-Muslims, especially from my best friend who was thousands of kilometers far from where I live but

who was always there to encourage me.

Currently, I am living in my university city. Hence I can go more freely to the mosque. It is a great delight to feel the strength the understanding, the devoutness and the kindness in my Muslim brothers and sisters in the mosque of my city.

I pray, that Allah would sweeten my parent's heart and that I should be given the lucidity to cope with this situation. When I have chosen to be Muslim, I have not even thought about what my family and non-Muslim friends could think of me. I was completely within my sphere of doubts and questions. That was a good point that I did not care about the consequences of such a conversion. All I knew is that I had discovered things that could not let me indifferent. I had to accept the responsibility of what I had learnt, no matter what could happen to me. Otherwise, I would say today that I would have been a hypocrite one, guilty of hypocrisy.^[1]

Laure



^[1] *Yaqeen International*, August 01, 1999, pages 74-76

How I Embraced Islam

My first contact with Islam was when my British employer assigned me to work on a project in Morocco. My task was to head a team of software developers implementing computer programmes and procedures for Morocco's second national television station, 2M. This assignment began in October 1991 and was successfully completed within only a few months of having started.

Why I was chosen for this assignment, I still do not know to this day and can only put it down to fate. Many of my colleagues knew the specific software better than me and they had the additional advantage of speaking French, but I was asked to go, so go I did.

As a keen traveller, I was determined to explore as much of the country and culture as possible and I recall that I spent much of my free time walking around Casablanca and taking train journeys to Rabat and Marrakech. I have many fond memories of the people I met in Morocco and places I experienced.

During my travels, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity of visiting the largest mosque in Africa, the King Hassan I Mosque which at that time was still under construction. My guide took great pleasure in advising me that laser lights will point the way to Makkah from the minaret.

I could not fail to hear the call to prayer five times every day and see the many Muslims dashing towards the mosque a few moments later. I was naturally curious but because of the limitations of my Arabic and French, I was unable to express my curiosity in a way which would get the answers I sought. Why did they go to the Mosque? What was this 'Allahu Akbar' I

kept hearing?

My questions about Islam grew during my Moroccan experience, but unfortunately the answers to these questions still remained unknown when the time came for me to return to England.

Curiosity Persisted in England:

So now I am in England. I have more questions about Islam than I had even before setting out to Morocco. I have nobody to ask as the nearest mosque is many miles away from my house on the outskirts of Southampton and to be quite honest, I would not feel comfortable about asking religious questions in England for fear of continued harassment by the people I was asking. After all, I had no intention of converting to Islam, either by force or otherwise - I just wanted to satisfy my curiosity.^[1]

In 1993 I began an evening course at Southampton University which covered Islamic History and a few weeks later I started a course in Arabic. The Islamic History course lasted about two months, but was cancelled by the University because of a general lack of interest. My colleague (note singular) and I were most disappointed, but at least I had the opportunity of finally getting the answers to the questions I had in Morocco. The Arabic course continued for about 2-3 months, but I have to confess that I found this too difficult and therefore my studies lapsed on my own account.

Building my Way to 'Sand City':

In 1994, I was contacted by a recruitment consultant in the UK with whom I had registered just after my return from Morocco. The conversation went something along the lines of 'Hello, this

^[1] Courtesy: *Da'wah Highlights*, Da'wah Academy International Islamic University, Islamabad (Pakistan). Vol. vii, No. xii: December 1996, pages 55-59 — Editor.

is the xyz company. How would you like to work in Kuwait? This was an opportunity I was not prepared to miss and even before I found out about my new employer, I had already made up my mind that my future was in Kuwait.

After I had formally accepted the position at my breakfast interview in London's Heathrow Airport blind panic suddenly struck me. I remember that for a few moments, everything literally turned black in my vision and I was terrified. What had I agreed to? What had made me give up the security, stability and normality of England to work some where in the Arabian desert which only two years ago was the middle of a war zone! How would I be able to sleep at night in my tent knowing that those scorpions and snakes were just waiting for me? (My knowledge of Kuwait unfortunately started and ended with views of Lawrence of Arabia, despite seeing the numerous televised pictures of Kuwait during the Gulf War). I again can only assume that fate brought me to Kuwait and that this is all part of Allah's plan.

Arrival in Kuwait:

Upon being met at the airport in June 1994, I was taken to the Plaza Hotel where I spent my first month in Kuwait as the apartment which was assigned to me had been damaged by water leakage. Just like Morocco, I spent most of my free time, walking around Kuwait City, despite the soaring heat being over 30C. I would walk past the IPC'S (Islamic Presentation Committee) office and bookshop almost on a daily basis, but it never occurred to me to visit them as I had no immediate questions concerning Islam at that time.

Later on, I began to watch the television programmes on KTV2 concerning Islam and became familiar with the 2-4 ISLAM [2447526] telephone number. Even though I had no immediate urge to call them, their telephone number somehow stayed in my mind from 1994 until the present day.

From watching these programmes and asking my Kuwaiti colleagues about what I saw, I again became interested in Islam and in 1995, my questions started to mount again, so I thought it was time to visit a bookshop.

Now, armed with my newly purchased copy of *The Life of Muhammad* by Haykal, I began to become vaguely familiar with who Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) was. But at this stage I was still not convinced that a God even existed. The people whom I worked with I thought were good, honest people who would not intentionally mislead me about Islam, so why could I still not believe what they were telling me? How could somebody prove to a 'western' non-believer that (a) there was a God and (b) that God was not Jesus?

You have to appreciate that I come from a generation of people who were educated about religion in school, but who never practised it, never prayed, never fully understood and consequently, never believed. It was time to get professional help. But not just yet. I had a vacation in two weeks time to England to celebrate Christmas and I was determined not to let any body disrupt that, no matter how good their intentions.

Islam Presentation Committee:

Whilst in England, I decided that upon my return to Kuwait, I would contact the IPC. I knew that they offered cultural activities and also Arabic language classes which I was determined to start again.

So, at the end of January 1996, my first correspondence with the IPC was dispatched by E-mail. The first of many meetings was arranged between myself, and IPC researcher, Mr. Abdul Wahab Al-Shaya.

I had hoped that the meeting would take the shape of a presentation whereby they would tell me about Islam, but they

insisted that there should be no compulsion in Islam and they therefore would not try to force any idea onto me and they would prefer to answer any questions I had. Despite my readings, I did not believe in any god, either Jesus or Allah and therefore I started that I did not know where to start. After many moments of silent travel in a car, fortunately my statement became self-evident and, as I had originally hoped, a brief history lesson on Islam ensued.

After many meetings, I asked them to prove to me that there was a god and the most comprehensive evidence I received was in the form of a small booklet entitled *The Qur'an and Modern Science* written by Maurice Bucaille. Within this book, I found extracts of Qur'an that I was unable to explain how any living person could have written, only 600 or-so years after Jesus.

For example, Verse 33 of *Surat 55* dealing with the conquest of space:

"O ye assembly of Jinn and men! If it be ye can pass beyond the zones of the heavens.

And the earth, pass ye!

Not without authority shall ye be able to pass!"

Also, Verse 33 of *Surat 21* which deals with the earth's rotation. At this time in history, people believed the world was flat, yet the Qur'an states:

"It is He Who created the Night and the Day,

And the sun and the moon: all (the celestial bodies).

Swim along, each in its rounded course."

I also became more aware of my surroundings, especially in the existence of oxygen for some reason. We cannot see it, smell it, hear it or touch it, yet we need it to allow us to live and we know it exists. Therefore, is it not possible that a god exists who possesses similar attributes?

I had a second question at this point too. If a god did not create the world, who did? Was it the 'big bang' theory and if so, who created the 'big bang'?

I had driven myself into a corner where I had no alternative, but to believe that God existed. Nobody had proved this to me; I proved it to myself. So now I am left with a decision — God exists, but which 'god' is God?

Now I Know There's a God, But Who is He?

Was Jesus God? I had never believed this before when reading the Bible at school, so there was no reason for me to start believing it now. On the other hand, I had a Book (The Qur'an) which is backed by scientific facts and which states that there is no God but Allah. Further to this, I have since discovered sections of the Bible which categorically state Jesus is not God. How can Christians believe that Jesus Christ is God after reading sections in their own Holy Book, such as:

Mathew 19: 16-17 "And Jesus said unto him, why callest thou me god? There is no god but One, that is God."

John 5:30 "I can of mine own self do nothing."

John 14:16 "And I will pray the father and he shall give you another Comforter (Muhammad), that he may abide with you forever.

My Decision to embrace Islam:

So now we are in Ramadhan, the month of fasting, the month Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) received his first elevation. My meetings with the IPC are taking place about 2-3 nights per week, either at the Al-Shaya Diwaniya, or the Coffee Lounge at the Plaza Hotel. What a strange coincidence I thought that this should be the hotel where I spent my first few weeks in Kuwait.

On 29th Ramadhan, 1416 (18th February, 1996), almost five

years after my first interest in Islam, I came to the conclusion that I believed Allah to be the One and only God and that Jesus was a Prophet sent by Allah and Muhammad was the final Prophet. I was ready to embrace Islam in the presence of my two friends at IPC and therefore a hastily arranged detour to the Al-Shaya Diwaniya took place where, closely guided by the IPC Chairman, I repeated the *Shahadah*, syllable-by-syllable.

There is no doubt that Allah guided me towards Islam and I thank the IPC for the assistance they have given me in my search for the truth.^[1]

Lee Cooper (U.K.)



Islam led A British couple to the Right Path^[2]

Sister Somaia and her husband Rashid are from Merseyside, where they both converted to Islam in 1983 following a terrible personal tragedy, which had a tremendous impact upon their lives. Following the sudden death of their newly born baby, a period of great pain, sorrow, anguish, and personal turmoil was replaced by comfort and peace when sister Somaia came to reflect upon the concept of destiny, fate, and a predetermined plan for all life. This beautiful realization in a period of immense difficulty paved the way towards both of them discovering Islam and the truth of its message for all mankind — *Editor*.

^[1] Courtesy: *Radiance* (New Delhi)

^[2] Courtesy: *Riyadh Daily* (K.S.A.) Friday, February 19, 1999, page 8

I am Somaia McTeer, and I am from Wallasey near the Wirral, which is in Merseyside. I am married to Rashid, who was also born in Wallasey. We both became Muslims in 1983.

We became Muslims in the Al-Rahma Mosque in Toxteth, Liverpool; and on the same day we had our Muslim marriage, although we had previously been married in Church. We are both former teachers.

My journey to Islam seems, on reflection, such a long and complicated one, and I now feel that I was making this journey little by little throughout my life. Circumstances and events, everything a part of a jigsaw, the pieces of which were moving together slowly to form the words of the declaration of faith. My faith is Islam, the pure and new baby, as indeed we all are, free from sin; just as my own baby was, Alexandra, our baby, was the catalyst; she changed our lives forever. Her birth and death, a few days later, stimulated such searching and questioning. My story therefore starts with her.

Before Alexandra was born, I was in a spiritual desert, a wilderness, emotionally and spiritually dead. I had searched for God in many situations. In Catholicism, the religion in which I had been educated, I looked for ways to Him, but they all seemed incomplete and lacking. However hard I tried to find the way to God, there seemed to be no path that was not obstructed by others to whom I was urged to pray, including the fearsome array of saints and statues of the religion of my childhood and the empty words and promises, uttered without meaning, without feeling, in the cold Protestantism, the religious experience of my youth. There seemed always to be confusion and no clear way to God. I was not involved but merely an outsider viewing the congregation's performance of it all. However hard I tried to feel God, to sense His presence and His guidance, it was impossible. My heart and mind were never fulfilled.

As I became older, the search was put aside. The outcome seemed fruitless. I had no one to talk to about my dilemma. No one to advise or guide me. No one to show me the way to God. There were so many questions that constantly returned to confront me: the role of saints and statues, the role of Mary, mother of Jesus, and most importantly, that of the Trinity. I could not find the answers within me and so I turned to look for others, who might point me in the right direction.

I sat in churches, speaking words from the prayer book, hearing people around me speaking words without any feelings, prayers without meaning; and God seemed to me a dozen lifetimes away. The words I pleaded to an empty space seemed lost before they had even been said.

In church, those promises and declarations of their faith, spoken in public for everyone to hear, seemed to me to be seldom followed through by the way in which they conducted their lives. In those, who declared their faith the loudest, there was no evidence of joy or love and respect for all life.

For me, my dilemma was highlighted, when I was admitted to hospital prematurely during my pregnancy which was now seriously threatened once again. I had to declare my religion on a form. I realized that I could no longer declare Church of England - nor any alternative. I felt so troubled and angry with myself for allowing the pressure of that situation to rush me into declaring that I belonged to a particular religion, when I knew that I did not. I felt so untrue to myself for allowing this to happen.

There were so many doubts within me and the ever-recurring questions, which could never be answered satisfactorily. Why was someone always in the way, standing between God and me? Who am I praying to? Which one of the three is God? I always had this confusion with the trinity concept. How can another human being, with all the associated weaknesses and

failings born in him, set himself above all others and forgive my sins for me?

Then there was the issue of worshipping saints and statues and the mother of Jesus. He who is supposed in Christian belief to sit at God's right hand. Why should my baby born out of such love and purity of intention, be born with the stain of original sin on her soul, and be refused a Christian burial if she was not baptized?

I tried so hard to accept this religion of Christianity as handed down to me by my family, but as I grew older and thought more about it, I realized that it was not for me and that I wanted none of it.

In January 1982, our much longed-for baby Alexandra was born on the 22nd and died just five days later. This was for me and my husband the hardest of times, the blackest of times when we were lost in helplessness and pain. Such a pain never grows less, never ever goes, so that even now there are such terrible moments, when I long to see her and hold her. It was such hard work when I left hospital alone and without her. I searched so hard, looking for acceptance of this awful loss and tried to find the reasons.

Even then I reasoned that her life was part of a plan. My doctor, who told me this and talked to me about destiny, was a Muslim, and I held on very hard to this piece of hope, that this dreadful loss, that was being experienced by my husband and me, had perhaps been meant to happen. Alexandra was born pure, beautiful and innocent and her life came from love and I was determined that I would never allow bad thoughts of blame to spring from what had happened to her. We had the gift of Alexandra for such a very short time. I had been too ill even to see her, but we had both in our own ways, grown to love and know her. How could bad thoughts and feelings of blame and anger be born in me from the gentleness that was her?

How well I succeeded in understanding what had happened I really don't know, because I was beset with strange feelings of pain and panic. They were such difficult days. The dreadful feelings of emptiness and loss and desolation that I tried to overcome, must have been for the loss of my baby's physical presence and for the loss of the part of my husband, who had died with her. With no baby to feed, hold and love, my arms were just so empty.

But all this time, I had the strangest feeling that although I couldn't physically hold or see her, I felt her near me just the same. There didn't seem to be death at all. She was still alive, but out of sight. I was so convinced that her spirit was and is still very much alive, but out of sight. Something of her could be found around me in nature, in other children's faces, in the breath of air against my skin, in the falling rain, and in my husband's eyes.

In nature, as I walked away my days, I was very calm and close to her. In nature, there was a close communion; and through nature I worked hard at that word "destiny," and for the first time I began to feel very close to God.

Then came a dream. One day I was resting on my bed, drifting somewhere in that space between sleep and wakefulness, when suddenly I found myself in a strange white place. All around me were people who I didn't recognize. They were all dressed in white, men and women, and even thought I didn't know them, I realized that I loved them as I might love my own family. Everyone, including myself, was dressed the same and facing in the same direction, all in rows of circles facing centrally. I looked around and found so much love surrounding me. I was loved by everyone, and although I didn't know them I loved them too.

This dream kept coming back to me in my thoughts. It was a powerful dream, something to be considered and examined

carefully. It seemed to complement the word my doctor had left me with: Destiny.

Then into my life came the Holy Qur'an. I had been looking at and examining other religions apart from Christianity and there it was, the Qur'an in my hands to read. Once the reading started in that summer of 1982, it was impossible to stop. I read, put the book down, then had to pick it up again. I felt that everything I read was familiar and right and that all the questions, that I asked myself and others previously, were answered so easily and clearly.

I couldn't believe what was happening. This book of God, the world of Allah is the guidance that I had been searching for. Only I didn't have to ask or search anywhere, because the search was happening within me. Then, at the right time, the book came into my hands. Was it my destiny?

The words and the message seemed to have belonged to me and to have been with me forever. It was just that all sorts of foolish impediments got in the way and prevented me from seeing clearly.

Months later, I saw a film on television about the Arabs. There was a scene from Makkah, showing pilgrims making the Muslim pilgrimage, or *Hajj*. That was when I realized I had really come home. My dream had been of Makkah and the Ka'ba in the Haram Mosque, towards which Muslims all over the world pray. The Ka'ba was built by the Prophet Abraham (may peace be upon him!) as the first house of God, the One God, Allah who has no equals, no partners, and to whom we pray for guidance in our lives and that we may have the strength and faith to accept His will for us whatever that may be which is our destiny.

Leila Rajab

The Call to Islam: A revert's Tale^[1]

Looking back on my past, I would have to say that the turning point in my life was without a doubt the birth of my daughter. Before she was born, I spent my life on a day to day basis, concentrating my time and attention to whatever crisis I could get my hands on. If there wasn't one, then I made one.

When I became pregnant, I knew I would be raising my child alone. If it weren't for the love, devotion, and determination of my mother, things would have been different.

When my daughter was 5 months old, she died of *Sudden Infant Death Syndrome* (SID), which is a medical term for *No known cause*.

I had never experienced such pain, panic, and complete emptiness. However throughout the funeral, I was consoling other people, telling them I believed with all my heart that God would not cause me such pain if He didn't have something incredible waiting for me in the future; all I had to do was stay on the right road, and God would show me when I was ready.

Friends would say "You'll see her again someday." I would question them openly: how does anyone know that I'll be going to Heaven? Just because I was a Christian was no guarantee, since I couldn't bring myself to swallow all of Christianity. There were too many unanswered questions.

So my quest for the One True Religion began out of a desire to

^[1] This is a story of sister MaDonna Johnson's Journey to Islam. She concluded that: "I realised that Islam was what I had been look for and For every challenge I come across the solution lies in following the the Path of Truth." (Courtsey: *Islamic Horizons*; January-February 1996, pages14-15)

insure that I would indeed see my daughter again.

I went through all the Christian religions diligently. Having been a Christian all my life, I found it very hard to look outside the church, even though my heart wasn't totally Christian.

People would say things to me like, "Jesus spoke to me today," or "Jesus is with you, all you have to do is invite him into your heart and you will see your daughter in heaven."

I was beginning to think I was doomed. I looked at Tarot cards, crystals, and even entertained the thought that all religions would take you to heaven, if you followed their beliefs.

Eventually I put my search on hold for awhile and got a job at a bar in Indianapolis. It was there that I met a girl, who later turned out to be a good friend for a while. She had three of four businesses running out of her home, none of them doing very well, and some of them questionable.

One day, she asked me if I wanted to go to Malaysia. She said she wanted me to buy some Malaysian style clothes, get pictures taken of them, and find an importer-exporter to handle the business. Without thinking I said "I'm there!"

I arrived in Kuala Lumpur during the middle of Ramadhan. I'd never heard of Islam before, and had no idea that Malaysia was an Islamic country. Almost every woman I saw had a scarf on her head in 95 degree heat!

I also noticed that people went out of their way to be nice to me, it took a very special friend (Plus, he was one of the few who could speak English fairly well) to explain that Malaysia was an Islamic country, and Muslims believe that whenever we do something nice for someone for the pleasure of Allah, then we will be rewarded for that deed on Judgment Day. *In Sha Allah*.

However, all I could see were the negative aspects of Islam, the same things others see, who are ignorant about Islam; so I

bought some Islamic books (including a Qur'an) and began studying Islam.

I asked many questions, such as why do women cover their whole body, except for the face and hands? Why is everyone so happy and willing to fast throughout the day? How could anyone be happy about starving themselves? It seemed suddenly that no one could speak English well enough to satisfy me, so I turned to the Qur'an.

Ever since I can remember, I have felt out of place in Christianity, like I was the only one in the whole church who didn't know the joke was on me.

The more I studied about Islam, the more I began to wonder if this was the road to my daughter: would this religion get me into Heaven?

Although my biggest obstacle was the Islamic concept of Jesus (may peace be upon him!), and how would I explain this to everyone at home, I found the answers to some of my questions and realized that Islam was what I had been looking for.

But I had a problem, should I take the challenge... become a Muslim and walk the straight path to heaven? Or deny the Truth I knew in my heart out of fear of disapproval and persecution from family and friends... only to abide in the Hellfire forever?

I constantly carried with me a feeling of doom and anxiety. This was my state of mind everyday while I was deciding whether I should revert to Islam or not.

For me, this decision was not so easy. Islam is not a part time religion; a true Muslim doesn't practice Islam one day a week. Islam is a full-time challenge with enormous struggles, as well as benefits. The more you learn and understand, the more you realize you have only just begun to scratch the surface, which

makes you strive even harder to learn more.

One day I woke up with the words, "OK, I believe, I will go and revert to Islam," and from that moment on, all of my turmoil and anxiety was gone *Alhamdulillah*.

All of the pain I had felt from my past experiences, including my daughter's death, were gone. The nightmares stopped, and I felt the most incredible peace.

I went to Perkim, the Malaysian Muslim Welfare Organization, and took my *Shahadah*, filling my life with the peace and love of Allah. *Alhamdulillah*.

Looking back, I can say all of the things I experienced on my path to Islam were well worth the effort and pain, because now, *In Sha' Allah*, I will be able to see and hold my daughter again, if I can stay on the right path.

Sure, I still have challenges, being Muslim doesn't mean I won't have problems. But being a Muslim does mean that for every challenge I come across, the solution lies in following the path of Truth. And at the end of that path lies Heaven, my daughter and numerous other pleasures that the human mind can't begin to comprehend.

All praises are due to Allah for bringing me to the Truth and for His grace in making me a Muslim.

Mosque Atmosphere Impressed British Woman to embrace Islam^[1]

Sister Maimuna, formerly Joan Dixon, was born into a non-churchgoing Christian family. Despite this, she developed a high sense of spirituality and religious devotion in her youth. Unfortunately, an incident occurred after which she lost faith in God, however,

^[1] Courtesy: *Riyadh Daily*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia Friday, November 20, 1998, Page 8. — Editor

she was guided back onto the right path, but could never again reconcile her faith in the church. She then started to study other religions and also visited a mosque, and she says that she instantly felt at home in this new atmosphere. After embracing Islam, Sister Maimuna traveled to Pakistan to experience life in a country where the majority of the people are Muslims — *Editor*.

I was born into a Christian family, non-church going, who nevertheless sent us to Sunday school for religious instruction. The existence of God was taken for granted quite naturally. We all had a sense of His presence as part of our lives, watching over us, whether we did good or bad.

In my teens I became fervently religious and seriously considered becoming a nun and entering a convent. I became 'confirmed' in the Anglo Catholic wing of the Church of England, which encompassed all the ceremonials I so loved; statues, bells, incense, pomp and circumstance in a dimly lit setting. I can recall my confirmation service, dressed in a long white veil and kneeling before the Bishop. I was genuinely devoted and practiced regular prayer, meditation, fasting and self denial.

Then, all of a sudden, I lost my faith. Something happened to somebody for whom I had prayed. For the first time I felt that my prayers were not being answered. I had, in a childlike way, seen the world as good and belonging to God. Devastated, I viewed the world now with newly acid eyes, questioning everything I hitherto believed in. Terminal illness, disability, earthquakes, plane crashes and even the fact that people needed spectacles; all of these things pointed, in my mind, to the fact that God did not exist. It was all a trick, and everything was a lie.

I felt total emptiness, loneliness; and disillusion. It is no exaggeration to say that the world now had no meaning for me.

Without a Higher Power, I did not know how to continue, and I looked around to see if others felt the same. Alas, in the West, religion is often the last taboo and talking about it causes shyness, so I had no one with whom I could discuss my feelings. I couldn't even talk with priests at my church, as I now regarded them as conspirators in this con-trick and myth.

By chance, at school I studied some religious orders of monks and nuns for a sociology essay. I wrote to them asking hard questions, but expecting no answers. I wondered if they too were innocent "dupes," living totally for God, if He ever existed. Yet their utter dedication and sacrifice were apparent, and I thought that if God existed, they must have indeed found Him. Slowly, these monks and nuns in their hidden, contemplative lives, far removed from the material world, helped me to believe again.

They exerted no pressure or dogma, and seemed humble and at peace with life. In the stillness of their monasteries, seeing their absolute reliance on God, I somehow found Him again.

However, while faith in God returned, faith in the church did not. I still questioned the complex doctrines and ceremonies, and challenged everything. Why did Christ's (peace be upon him!), leaders live in palaces, as the Bishops and Popes did? What hid God to do with bureaucracy and legalism?

Equally damaging was the fact that I could no longer believe in the Trinity and related issues. I asked clergymen. If Jesus was somehow "God," yet also His son, to whom did he pray? To himself? I was told that this was a holy mystery, taken on trust only.

I began to study other religions, from Judaism to the 'Hare Krishna' cult.

Little I knew of Islam focused on media portrayal, satire, and stereotyping. I decided to visit the regent's Park Mosque, and

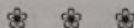
the event was a real revelation and turning point. The wonderful feeling of family pervaded the place, with all generations mixing together, and small children scampering over those at prayer.

There was no solemn or false atmosphere, and I met hospitable people who became firm friends. I found the faith simple and true, and with the hospitable family atmosphere, I at once felt at home. I started to study Islam and correspond with learned Islamic scholars around the globe. Initially, I found the Arabic prayer exceedingly difficult and many other things required effort to adjust to. Dressing modestly as Muslims are meant to was not difficult as I had always preferred such fashions.

However, wearing the head covering scarf was a problem. Somehow it attracted hostility, since I worked in a non Muslim, secular environment, and people feared it. They visualize such an outward sign as connected to political upheaval, terrorism and so on. One is thought to follow a set party agenda, when, in fact, we are all individuals with different opinions.

I have since always concentrated on following the inner life of Islam, by reading, studying and devotion, and have stayed away from ethnic, cultural or political opinions. This has enabled me to carry on as a Muslim, never getting disillusioned with Islam as I have discovered the spirit of true Islam. I pray that God willing I will always have this strength.^[1]

Maimuna (formerly Joan Dixon)



^[1] *The MWL Journal*

Islam: My Personal Experience

Mrs. Mardijah Aldrich Tarantino is of American and French background. She entered the fold of Islam after a thorough and deep study. After embracing Islam she declared that 'it is my personal experience'. She chose the Straight Path when she and her husband Rashid were living in Indonesia.

She has six children. She has travelled widely. She enjoys painting, languages and writing for children. She is currently living in California, U.S.A. alongwith her family.

Her recent book namely *Marvellous stories from the Life of Muhammad*. In the preface of the book she wrote:

This book is not only for Muslim children, but for all children, in the hope that it will awaken in them a feeling of who the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions were, and the times they lived in. I ask God's forgiveness for any inaccuracies and pray that my good intentions will outweigh them. Only God can know the Truth.

Mr. Khurram Murad, Director General of the Islamic Foundation wrote the foreword. He writes about the book:

I believe you will enjoy immensely reading these stories about our beloved Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). At least for me it was a case of love first sight. As soon as I had finished reading the manuscript, which arrived on my desk unsolicited, I decided to publish it. It is not very often that I receive such beautifully written manuscripts. I knew at once that Mardijah had an extraordinary talent for telling stories to children, stories which will hold their imagination for a long time to come.

To tell stories about our beloved Prophet (may the peace and

blessings of Allah be upon him!) is not so easy. No doubt his life is a limitless store house of priceless treasures which can be brought out and presented, for ever and ever, in an endless number of ways without ever exhausting their rich potentialities. Nevertheless his every word, his every deed, even his silence, is not only a source of light and joy for us but also an example to be followed. We Muslims are therefore very particular in recording and preserving his life, as accurately as we can. But we all know that children love to be told stories. Hence Mardijah chose to weave stories, for the children of today, out of the greatest ever human life story. We took some time to smooth out problems of historicity and edition. What has emerged may not be fully satisfactory to everyone, but there is no denying that she has been enormously successful in writing stories which will enchant many young hearts.

I now leave you to savour the charms and beauties that lie ahead.

Marvellous Stories from the Life of Muhammad is a collection of 18 stories from the life of Prophet Muhammad (Blessings of Allah and peace be upon him). Not only do they highlight the main stations of his life-span — from orphaned childhood to Prophet of God and beloved leader of the Muslim *Ummah* but also introduce the basic teachings of Islam, to which he called and invited all mankind, written for all children both Muslim and others, these stories will certainly awaken in them a feeling of who the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions were and for what they so unremittingly strived and struggled. This book was published by the Islamic Foundation, U.K. in 1982

Mardijah Aldrich Tarantino

I have Finally found Peace in Islam

I loved modeling, the limelight, the competition but still I used to feel with all the success I had, that something was wrong, something was missing but I never really knew what it was." says former model Maria Esther Roman, 35, from USA who lives in Jeddah with her husband and children. Why do you want to publish yourself ?" was the first question that my mother asked me 14 years go when she first learned that I had decided to convert to Islam.

Both my parents were shocked. They couldn't understand why I'd taken such a decision. 'What do you mean you won't date?' My mother would constantly ask. However, they comforted themselves by not taking me seriously. I remember my mom once saying: 'I'll give it all a couple of months and you'll get over it.'

But deep down I knew that this was a lifelong thing. This was some thing that would never change.

It all started when I was a 20-year-old college student. I heard about Islam through a few of my new Muslim friends.

It was the first time that I actually heard that such a religion existed. Because of my natural curiosity and because at the time I was actually questioning the validity of my own religion (Catholicism), I started asking questions about this new religion.

I would go to these friends of mine with questions, and they would come back to me with answers. The more I learned, the more convinced I became.

The decision to convert came quickly after only four months but it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy changing who I had been all my life, not because I didn't want to, but because this was the way people had known me for so long. It was difficult

convincing them that all would change.

I had been modeling since the very young age of 14. And somehow I loved it. I loved the limelight, the competition, the excitement the make-up but still I used to feel with all the success I had that something was wrong, something was missing but I never really knew what it was I don't know what exactly made me feel that. But all of a sudden, I was no longer comfortable being who I was.

I had been weighing the possibilities in my mind. I remember sitting in my cap and gown, for college graduation and thinking, 'what next?' So one day I visited a friend and poured out my heart to her, and as I was leaving she told me: 'Don't worry Maria, think of where you've been and where you're going, and God will lead you through some kind of light. As this woman finished her words I opened the door to leave and was confronted by strong sunlight. I took that as my answer. I decided to embrace Islam, right then and there.

Over the years, my parents have learned to accept it. My mother would try to make me special meals when pork was being served, and she'd call me to put on my scarf, if visitors came by. Islam in itself has also softened my heart towards my parents. And now I understand and respect the hardships they had to go through as first generation Puerto Ricans in the USA.

Many of my friends would try to make me change direction but I would always kneel down and ask God to lead me to the right path, and to keep me strong. And He did. I never regretted, nor ever will regret the path I have chosen. I was sick of the life I had, and now I have finally found peace. *Alhamdulillah* I have a choice and I've taken it. Islam bumbles me. It makes me feel modest and clean."^[1]

Maria Esther Roman (former U.S. Model)

^[1] Courtesy: *Arabian Woman*. Reproduced from the *Riyadh Daily*, November, 10, 2000. Page 7

Allah opened my heart to the Truth and guided me to seek knowledge!

Sister Velasco worked as a Sunday School teacher. She was very active in Bible studies, but circumstances led her away from what she believed and she was made to feel 'unimportant', a 'lost sheep' and was alienated but she was dependent on church fellowship.

It is worthy to note that when she accepted Islam, the religion of Allah, this dependence disappeared due to her firm belief in Allah Who gives (all) sustenance, Lord of Power, Steadfast (for ever). "He is exalted in Power, Full of wisdom." (*Surat Ibrahim*, 14:4)

It is worth mentioning that she entered the 'Faith of Islam, through thorough and deep study and by conviction. She is thankful to Allah Who guided her to the Right Path and to Shaikh Mohammad Al-Segayan, before whom she reaffirmed her *Shahadah* — Editor.

When I came to Saudi Arabia, I had what one may call a 'culture shock'. I had to conform to a variety of social norms and mores which I found frustrating in the beginning. For three years, I felt as though I was in limbo.

I met several Muslim brothers and sisters from my country of origin who classify themselves as original Muslims, because they are born of Muslim parents; that they know more about Islam. Matters did not improve until such time as I heard through the grapevine that people were alleging that I was only pretending to be a Muslim and felt very threatened when I learned that I was being spied upon. It did not occur to me that I still had to convince people. Even though, I was disturbed by this allegation, I feel that faith is a personal relationship

between man and Allah as aptly explained in WAMY's publication *Concept of God in Islam*:

"When faith enters a person's heart, it causes mental states which result in certain actions." Taken together these mental states and actions are the proof for true faith. The Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Faith is that which resides firmly in the heart and which is proved by deeds."

Why then did I become a Muslim? The answer is in my *Shahadah*:

"There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger." *Alhamdulillah*, Allah opened my heart to the truth and guided me to seek knowledge. He says:

"It is He Who has sent His Messenger with Guidance and the religion of Truth, that he may proclaim it over all religions, even though the pagans may detest (it)." (*Surat As-Saff*, 61:9)

One important thing I learned in Islam is to follow the Holy Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, and in doing so, Allah will guide believers to the path of righteousness. Thus, I craved to know more about Islam and to my surprise, this quest brought my family and me a supreme sense of well-being. Friday Islamic classes knitted our family closer. Coming home from school, I feel like a student telling everyone what I learn and this encourages interaction among family members as everyone pitches in with their ideas or opinions. I find that memorizing *Surats* before my five-month old daughter is a better if not the best way to converse with her instead of baby-talking with her.

Islam also teaches best manners and characters inspite of whatever situation or circumstances we may be in:

Narrated that Abdullah bin Amr: the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) never used bad language.

He used to say:

"The best among you are those who have the best manners and character." (*Al-Bukhari* 4:759)

Likewise, Islam warns against bad habits:

"No man of bad habits shall enter Paradise." (*Tirmidhi*) Abu Huraira narrated that the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) said: "Beware of suspicion for suspicion is the worse of all tales. And do not look for other's fault and do not spy and do not hate one another. O Allah's worshippers be brothers (as Allah has ordered you)." (*Al-Bukhari*, 9:90).

In Abul-'Ala Maudoodi's book, *Towards Understanding Islam*, he has written:

"The fundamental principle of the law (*Shariah*) is that man has the right, and in some cases it is his bounden duty, to fulfill his genuine needs and desires and make very effort to promote his interests and achieve success and happiness but (and it is an important but) he should do all this in such a way that not only the interests of other people are not jeopardized and no harm is caused to their striving towards the fulfillment of their rights and duties, but there should be all possible social cohesion, mutual assistance and cooperation among human beings in the achievement of their objectives." (Emphasis added)

Long before I became a Muslim, I was (a Sunday School teacher) very active in Bible Studies, crusades (i.e. Rev. Billy Graham), World Vision (charity organization for orphans, indigent families), etc. As years passed, I observed that what we were trying to do was to get as much converts to our religious affiliation (Baptist) as we can. The question arose in my mind: What then? Is this just a matter of quantity? A humungous congregation during Sundays?

I started to think about 'quality conversion' and drifted far, far away from what I used to believe in. True to my expectations when I was active in any of the church activities, nobody noticed me like before, elders spoke of one like me as a backslider and so called friends from church started coming to our house to lecture me. Without church activities, I was made to feel unimportant, a lost 'sheep' and was alienated. As an addict is dependent on cocaine, I was a dependent on church fellowship for my self-esteem. When I came to Islam, this dependence disappeared because as Muslims, the 'ego' is not fed with recognition, praises and awards for active participation in whatever so-called spiritual activities. Instead, the ego is fed with humility and modesty that in everything one can accomplish, no matter how great it is, the merit goes to Allah. A Muslim does a righteous deed purely for the pleasure of Allah. A Muslim recognizes that Allah rewards every good deed done for His cause. All praise belongs to Allah alone:

"For Allah is He Who gives (all) the All-Provider, Lord of Power, the Most Strong (for ever)." (*Surat Az-Zariyat*, 51: 58) "He is exalted in Power, full of Wisdom." (*Surat Ibrahim* 14: 4)

Thus, as a brother or a sister is added to the community of Islam, our family grows and as members of one family, we are all equally important no matter if one is born Muslim or by reverting to Islam. What matters is the degree of righteousness that we do as Muslims for the pleasure of Allah. For the Holy Qur'an says:

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair), of male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not may you despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all

thing)." (*Surat Al-Hujurat*, 49:13)

Finally, all praise be to Allah, I hold dear in my heart the opportunity of hearing the words of Shaikh Mohammad Al Segayan before whom I reaffirmed my *Shahadah* when I came to this country. I share to you, to the best of my memory, the beauty of the essence of his words: "Dear sister, please remember, inasmuch as the fingers of your hand are equal, do not judge Islam by what you see from your fellow Muslims." In line with this, my advice to all new Muslims and non-Muslims as well is to read the Holy Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. Read all about Islam for the divine revelation that Allah sent down to Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) pertains to reading:

"Read! in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who has created (all that exists) He has created man from a clot (a piece of thick congealed blood). Read and your Lord is Most Generous. Who taught (the writing) by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not." (*Surat Al Iqraa*, 96:1-5)

Indeed, *Allahu Akbar*. May Allah help us not to make judgments on our fellow Muslims lest we be judged by non-Muslims on ways which they see are apart from the teachings of Allah and away from the examples set by Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!). May Allah bestow upon all of us the knowledge of the Holy of Qu'ran and the *Sunnah*. May He guide to act righteously. Verily, Islam is the religion of Truth.^[1]

Mariam Velasco



[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Future* and *Riyadh Daily* (15th October, 1999)

My Heart felt Strong especially as I read the Holy Qur'an!

Sister Mariola Laila Szczesny is a registered nurse and freelance writer who lives in Canada. She belonged to Raman Catholic family. At the time, she accepted Islam, she was still living with her parents, but she did not tell her parents that she had embraced Islam, the religion of Allah. She had read about Ramadhan only from the books. As long as, she remained with her parents, she could not practice Islamic rituals, for example, fasting, prayer, charity etc. openly. With the result, she was not satisfied. But when her parents came to know about her entering the fold of Islam, they forced her to leave the house. At last, she rented her own apartment and welcomed the holy month of Ramadhan with zest and zeal and felt an extraordinary experience. During the holy month of Ramadhan, she prayer and held the Holy Qur'an so dear to her heart. She read the Holy Qur'an after each prayer and kissed it profusely. Now she felt the experience of fasting, prayer and charity in the real spiritual sense of the term. She sought Allah's forgiveness. She felt an extraordinary joy, her heart felt strong, especially when she read the Holy Qu'ran.

We, with great pleasure, represent and reproduce *Nights of Enlightenment and Ramadhan: The First Fulfilling Days*, in which sister Laila describes her experiences for the benefit of our esteemed readers — Editor.

I was born in a small city Poland. My parents are simple religious folk who raised me as best they could. I was thus a typical middle class girl, growing up in a faith called Catholicism in which somehow I did not fit.

As a youngster I was pushed into being a church-going young lady. In the old-fashioned way, every Sunday was church. We went to prayer on all holidays and special occasions.

Somehow, I was different: A bit scared, shy and lonely. During my teenage years, I was practically alone. No boyfriends, not even female friends. It was just me alone to reflect on religion.

I lived this life until I was 18, when I came to Canada with my family. It was a tough start because I had to learn everything from scratch. But it was here that I started a new life, I mean a new and unexpected life.

Soon after coming to Canada, I met a young student from Lebanon. Like me, he too was new to this big country. But he was also different. He introduced me to this new and crazy religion that was what I thought of Islam at first.

We used to get into arguments because of our opposing points of view. Despite our disagreements, the words: "There is Only One God" was now always in my mind. Even then I used to think that he must be crazy to believe in such a thing. It did not occur to me that it was I, who was wrong.

Since I met this Lebanese boy, my life practically began to crumble. Not because he was a Muslim but because I was now torn between thinking who was right and who was wrong.

I guess that I remained in this state for two or three months then a miracle began to unfold. One day while I was in church with my family, I realized that he was right. I said to myself how absurd it is that these people in church say that God is one and that Jesus is His son. Now these words began to shock me, I started questioning: if God was One then how could Jesus be His son?

From the time that I got this realization, I hardly spoke out in church. My parents started to notice that I did not go to church anymore, and I tried to find excuses for staying away from

church. They knew that something was wrong. They tried to put the blame on this Lebanese boy. They simply hated him. But nothing could stop me anymore!

I secretly ordered a copy of the Qur'an to be sent directly to me from Poland. I learned to pray and secretly fasted so no one would notice. For the sake of pleasing my parents, I even went to church. Everything I did was a sham. Only Allah knew how difficult it was for me and how hurt I felt going through all this.

The most beautiful experience was reading the Qur'an. I read my Qur'an at night when everyone had gone to bed. I read it and shed a million tears. I cried into my pillow. I even chose a Muslim name for myself. It was suggested that I become Maryam from Mariola.

I didn't like it, because it reminded me of what I had once believed. Instead, I chose the name Laila. It means night in Arabic, because it was at night that I read the Qur'an and cried that Allah enlightened me by the words of *Al-Fatihah*, the first chapter, and other chapters of Qur'an. It reminded me of the first pages of the Qur'an I had read and first tears I had shed. It took me a year to understand and decide what I should do. By now I had learnt to pray and fast properly. My life was a joy. Happiness filtered through the new light that Allah had beamed upon me. Every day was a new experience and every moment was fulfilling. I felt happy and contented because Allah had blessed me with understanding. But life wasn't easy. There was hope and peace inside but I was faced with the struggle to survive in the world outside.

It was over a period of two years that I became a true Muslim, and in that process I became a total stranger to my family. I still loved them. I knew I would be thrown out of home, the moment they found out about my beliefs. I waited for what Allah held in store for me.

At Christmas, I could not resist any longer. My heart swelled and I declared my faith openly. I knew that I had hurt them deeply. I knew it was their holiday and I should have waited but it was Allah's will that I should not wait. I could no longer put up with this darkness and be present in their holiday which was full of ceremonies and idolatry.

As expected, I was immediately thrown out of the house. I packed my bags and found a place to live. My heart was broken in that I had lost my family, but I felt blessed in that I had found Allah.

Everyone in my family, except my father, turned their backs on me. My father said that I was free to choose. He is still close to me, and has provided me the moral and emotional support that I needed in this difficult moment. He may never accept my faith but he has assured me that I shall always be his daughter and he loves me very much.

Since then, I have been living by myself and thank Allah for every day of my life. Allah has given me the most valuable thing in life, the Qur'an.

He opened the doors to the Hereafter when my family shut their doors in my face. I pray that the light of this faith be spread to countless others, who now, may be in the darkness that I once shared.^[1]

Mariola Laila Szczesny



^[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Horizons*; September-October 1995, page 16

Ramadhan: The First Fulfilling Days

Every soul shall taste death says the Qur'an. Ramadhan is such an experience. How? The answer is simple. Ramadhan is like a separation from the reality of the routine of daily life, and like a transformation into someone completely different. It is a transformation into a being whose singular thought is Allah alone.

At the time I accepted Islam, I was still living with my strictly Roman Catholic parents. I knew about Ramadhan only from books. I had yet to tell them about my new faith.

My first Ramadhan was hectic and scary because I had to constantly come up with excuses and often lie to my parents about not eating with them at the regular times.

Praying was no different. I had to hide and pray and was terrorized with the thought that someone would open the door and discover me in the state of prostration. Soon, they found out that I was a Muslim, and I was obliged to move out because I was no longer welcome in the house.

The first Ramadhan was full of excuses and frustrations, but my real Ramadhan experience came the next year when I was in my own apartment. What an extraordinary experience, and what it meant to me.

I was on my own with no distractions and no fears; but to pray and seek Allah's forgiveness for as long in the night as I could. This experience really purified my soul.

During this Ramadan, I prayed and held the Qur'an so close to me that I was even tempted to sleep with it under my pillow. I read the Qur'an after each prayer and kissed it profusely.

As a new Muslim, the experience of prayers, charity and fasting

were completely new to me. After going through these experiences, I realized how much I had missed during all those years of my ignorance.

I wished that all these years could come back to me so that I could relive them as a Muslim. I wanted a sort of fast replay on all those years in this hallowed month.

I completely isolated myself from reality. I went to work simply to work for survival, but after work, I came home as fast as I could so that I would not miss my prayers. I said my prayers, I begged Allah for His forgiveness and cried for His help.

It was as if I had 'died', just for the sake of Allah to get away from the mundane to dwell at a higher level.

Often my feet felt sore because I had stayed in one position in prayer too long, but my heart felt strong, especially as I read the Qur'an. I felt strong enough to offer one more extra prayer or *Dua*.

There were times that I felt I had been purified of all that 'dirt' I had been carrying during all those years of ignorance. There were times that I felt a certain scariness and shame about my past errors and begged hard for His forgiveness, help, strength and guidance. As the month was coming to a close, I prayed that it would continue longer.

I was so drawn into the experience of Ramadhan at times, I felt as if I were 'flying' to Heaven. In my mind, I was so close that I remember one day, I even saw a staircase to Heaven and each day of Ramadhan, I was a step closer to Heaven.

I no longer was scared of death. As Ramadhan was coming to a close, I even wanted to 'die' because now nothing mattered to me, not life, not work, or none of its problems. I had been drawn into Ramadhan so closely, I promised to Allah that I would read a part every night, and I did.

When I could not fast for a few days, I simply cried. I wanted Allah to give me all those thirty days of Ramadhan in full so I could have more time to seek His forgiveness, and to seek His pleasure.

I could hardly sleep during the last ten days of Ramadhan, and I felt that I had been reborn as a new person, a real servant of Allah. After that, my Ramadhans became quieter as I gained greater confidence because I knew I was leading the life of a good *Muslima*, and following the rules of Allah as best as I could.

So I 'die' each year during Ramadan just to be closer to Allah and to be reborn for the next one.^[1]

Mariola Laila Szczesny



Convert devotes time for *Dawa*

"I feel proud of becoming a Muslima I'm certain that I've done the right thing for my salvation. I feel pity for those who choose to remain ignorant about Islam," says Jannah Felesmenia Abdur Rahaman, formerly Delia Felesmenia, a Filipino woman, after embracing Islam. She declared her new faith in the presence of the chief of courts in Jeddah recently.

"I feel now the security and support from Allah. After my conversion to Islam, I believe that all my past sins had been erased and now I am counting on my good deeds," Jannah said.

Jannah learned about Islam by attending courses at the Islamic Education Foundation (IEF) in Al-Hamrah district. She said all

^[1] Courtesy: *Islamic Horizons*; January-February, 1996, page 13

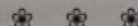
doubts regarding her old belief had been cleared by IEF teacher. "Islam had been a strange word not only to me, but to many others in northern Philippines. We knew about Muslims, not Islam," she said.

Jannah studied the lessons at IEF carefully before finally abandoning her previous faith and embracing Islam. Previously, she was a member of Youth Fellowship Club in her country preaching Christian message. While working as a dental assistant at a polyclinic, Jannah still attends the IEF classes, and she wants to devote herself totally to learn more about Islamic teachings. Jannah plans to get higher education in Islamic studies in a Jeddah or Makkah school for women to prepare herself for propagating Islam in Philippines.

Jannah introduced Islam to her family immediately after her conversion by sending letters and pamphlets about the newfound faith. Her mother cried upon reading her first such letter and wished her good luck, saying that her two children were happy about the good news.

Jannah convinced her husband, Graciano Casianoto, about the importance of attending IEF classes. A week after her conversion, Casianoto also embraced Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Abdul Malik. Upon hearing the news his employer rejoiced saying that after 16 years working with him, Casianoto has become his brother in faith. Jannah hopes that her parents would also declare their Islam soon.^[1]

Jannah Felesmenia



^[1] Courtesy: *Arab News* (Jeddah, K.S.A.) 26th March, 1997, page 12. We are thankful to the Staff Reporter who interviewed Sister Jannah Felesmenia Abdur Rahman — Editor

Beauty of *Salat* brings Canadian lady to Islamic fold

[Following is the story of a Canadian lady, who embraced Islam on September 22, last year. On the occasion of the first anniversary of her conversion to Islam, she wishes to share her thoughts, experiences and sentiments with our readers. Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Her name is Maryam Fisher and since 1996 she has been working at the Medical Records Section of the Northwest Armed Forces Hospital in Tabuk — Editor]

Before I embraced Islam, Islam embraced me. During my first weeks in the Kingdom, I became very aware of a sensation that seemed to vibrate from the earth and the air. I commented to a close friend that there is a strong spirituality in this country and that we were working and living on a sacred land.

Having been raised in a rather strict Christian religion according to western standards, my religion at that time emphasized family life, modesty for women, no smoking or alcohol, husband as the head of the family, unmarried young men and women were preferred to socialize in groups with adult supervision, and for several years in the early 1900's permitted polygamy in marriage.

As I studied the Islamic faith, many of the Islamic traditions were not overly foreign to me being similar to my upbringing. During my first years in Tabuk, I asked many questions about Islam and was impressed with several Muslims I came in contact with them at work. I could see that these people were leading their lives according to the teachings of their religion and the peace that Islam gave them was visibly evident. All of my adult life I had been searching for that peace and closeness

with God.

In the spring of 1998, I visited the old Omayyad Mosque in the city of Damascus, particularly since I had read that Muslims believe when Jesus Christ (may peace be on him!) is returned to earth, it will be in this mosque and from the moment I entered the mosque, I was overwhelmed with emotions and tears that I could not explain. Returning to Tabuk from this visit, I developed a strong appetite to study more and more about Islam. Studying at the Islamic library of the hospital where I work could not quench my thirst to know more and more about Islamic beliefs and teachings.

Visiting Canada later that year I was heartsick at the society focused on money, prestige and material possessions. I wanted more in my life. Returning to Tabuk, I could not believe the beauty of the Muslim men performing their *Salah* to Allah in the airport in New York as I waited for my plane. Upon my return to Tabuk, each time I heard the *Adhan* (the Call for prayers), tears came to my eyes and I experienced a great desire to pray. I knew at that time that I must become a Muslim and took my *Shahadah* (open declaration of faith in Islam) September 22.

In this past year wonderful experiences have far outweighed the low points when some old friends and relatives turned away. I have performed *Umrah* in Makkah on the 27th night of Ramadhan with dear friends: wept as the heavy rain poured from the heavens seeming to wash away our sins during the *Taraweeh* prayers at the Holy Haram in Makkah. I have visited the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah several times and wept many tears of joy at each occasion. I have experienced the completion of my first Ramadhan fasting (*Saum*) and celebrated in the blessing and joys associated with this.

This summer, I visited India and performed the Friday congregational prayers at India's largest mosque in Delhi. I

was overcome with emotion as I saw the Indian Muslim ladies taking from the shelves the copies of the Holy Qur'an for recitation, covered in clean but simple cloth coverings. One could see their tenderness and love for the Holy Book.

I thought of the many beautiful copies of the Holy Qur'an in both Makkah and Madinah and I thanked Allah for the blessings He has bestowed on the Kingdom and its people. Saudi Arabian citizens are so blessed and fortunate to be born in a country that maintains the Two Holy Mosques, and to easily understand and read the Qur'an in the language Allah delivered it to Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). I wonder if they realize how very blessed they are as I and others struggle and study daily to learn the language so that we may read the Holy Qur'an in its original language. I want desperately to understand the Imam as I watch the *Salat* from Madinah and Makkah on the television, and by the Grace of Allah, I am being assisted and taught. I can now slowly read the letters in the chapters of the miraculous Qur'an. *Alhmdulillah*.

This summer I returned for a vacation to Canada, my first time as a Muslim. My two grown sons couldn't have been prouder of their mother Maryam. I thank Allah for them and the questions they asked as we discussed Islam and my beliefs on many occasions.

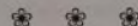
My city in Canada has few Muslims and my appearance in *Hijab* caused many stares and a few comments. I experienced only one bad incident when a rather zealous Christian woman followed me shouting irrational accusations in a public shopping plaza. I remained calm and could see there was no way to enter a peaceful discussion with her, but I thought how wrong she was in her accusations. She will be among the losers.

I thank Allah for bringing me to Saudi Arabia. I know I came

here to become a Muslim. Last week, I was asked by another Muslim, what is the best thing about being a Muslim and I replied easily, "I have become closer to Allah".

All praise goes to God for all and I pray Allah will forgive my shortcomings and sins and have mercy on me as I continue to learn and grow as a Muslim woman. *In Sha Allah*, May Allah continue to bless the Muslim *Ummah* and to assist all of us in teaching and spreading His Word. *Ameen!*^[1]

Maryam Fisher



Behind the Islamic veil

Maryam Wannenburgh makes no excuses. She's chosen a way of life that horrifies her 'liberated' '90s sister but she's direct, strong, and she's content.

Maryam is a Muslim. A white Muslim. In South Africa that is unique.

"Life was never able to give me sufficient answers. Islam has done that and much more," says the 51-year-old grand-mother. The mother of two sons, Maryam says her family has adapted well to her chosen way of life. "At times it's been difficult, like when you go to a cocktail party and there is alcohol around and people keep trying to force you to take a drink and you just keep saying 'no thanks.'"

Her youngest son acted as a witness at her declaration. His friends, she says, have come to accept her and seldom comment on her *Hijab* (veil) when they visit her Kalk Bay flat.

^[1] Courtesy : *Saudi Gazette*, 1st October, 1999 page 9

Maryam is a professional woman who works as a training coordinator with mentally handicapped adults. She is also studying Adult Education and Training Development at the University of Cape town.

"There were always ingredients missing Christianity didn't provide them." She tried yoga, which she accepts was an important stepping stone in the meditative techniques she now practices.

A book on Islam, lent to her by her yoga teacher, provided the key: "It was like the pieces of a puzzle fitting into place." Since her conversion even her pottery hobby now helps to focus Maryam's thoughts.

She defends her religious choice from beneath a headscarf, her tall, heavy boned frame hidden behind the folds of an orange-patterned shift and black trousers. Black boots hide her ankles.

Maryam admits that her decision to convert did not come easily. "I thought about it for 18 months. I read as much as I could, talked to people and experimented with the Islamic way of life to make sure I could cope. The Western way of life doesn't demand discipline. But in Islam it is essential."

She is not unique in her choice. In Britain alone there have been an estimated 10000 Islamic converts in less than a decade and in the US that figure is believed to be even greater. Most of the new converts are women.

Batool Al Toma, a former Catholic who now works for the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, England, says, "Western feminists often look at Muslim converts as a catastrophe, but women converts see that society has deteriorated and they want to revive the importance of the family."

It is the deterioration in Western society that many believe is encouraging the upsurge in Islam.

For Maryam the attraction of Islam is the strength of

community and family ties. "For me Islam is not just a religion, it's a whole way of life. There is much more caring and sharing. In Muslim communities, you know who your next-door neighbors are. Everyone takes care of each other and family ties are so much closer. From the smallest child to the oldest grandmother, a family will always ensure they are looked after."

But what about the other side of the story, those dark tales of Islam's ruthless repression of women?

Practices such as female circumcision, which entails mutilation of body parts, still exist in some societies, asserts Fatimah Khan of the Islamic Women's Federation in Cape Town. However, this should be seen in a cultural context and are not synonymous with the teachings of Islam. "Many of the practices attributed to Islam will not be found in the Qur'an."

Fatimah says most prospective converts who come to her for advice are afraid their new religion will mean they must give something up. "I tell them they are going to grow, not give up. Islam will add to their lives, not take away."

Maryam says *Hijab* gives her a sense of security and, ironically, greater freedom. "When you wear a veil you are treated as a person, not a sex object. People take you seriously."

Thirty-eight-year-old Nouria, a former Protestant who converted to Islam in 1974 after finding Verses of the Qur'an in a London dustbin, revels in the wisdom of American feminist guru Camilla Paglia, yet she says she has been accused by other women of being a traitor to her sex. "But I could say the same about most of the women in my country. They have become less feminine. Muslim women are cherished and have a dignity completely absent from Western life. Everything the feminist movement is aiming for, except lesbianism and abortion, we've got."

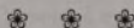
Fatimah takes up the defence of women. Islam, she says, had been colored by different cultural attitudes but times are changing and more women in the West are realising that Islam has a lot to offer.

In her book *Geraldine Brooks* recalls the time she sat watching a Muslim family on a beach in Australia.

"While the man splashed in the shallows with his toddlers, his wife sat on the sand, her long, loose dress arranged around her. It made me sad that the woman's tiny daughter, splashing so happily, would one day be required to forego that pleasure. But that would be her fight, not mine."

"Every now and then the little girl's mother fiddled with her headscarf as it billowed in the sea breeze. That woman had made her choice; it was different from mine. But sitting there, sharing the warm sand and soft air, we accepted each other. When she raised her face to the sun, she was smiling."^[1]

Maryam Wannaenburgh



What led a Hindu woman to Islam

My reversion to Islam cannot be attributed to any reason except a keen desire to seek the truth. In a way, I guess I was a born Muslim since a *Hadith* of the Prophet says that every newborn is a Muslim by nature. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian... My Hindu parents made Hindu for a while. That's all.

The family in which I was born and grew up was, from a point

^[1] Courtesy: Saudi Gazette: The Message. Friday August 4, 1995. Page 7

of view, no different from the generality of an orthodox Hindu family, where my mother was religious but my father was not. He was a social reformer and a very loving and kind person. I was a very obedient girl, abiding by the rules and regulations of the house and the school where I was studying.

Daily prayer as well as fasting was very compulsory in our house, though the children enjoyed certain exemptions. As I grew up, I adopted the same style as my mother's. The House Matron in my school was also very strict about maintaining prayer time. We had weekly outpasses for praying in the temple or churches. I did visit churches and attended some of the Sunday prayers and a few conventions. I read the Bible too. I had both Muslim as well as Christian friends. But I found no difference in their attitudes or practices. So I did not bother to ask about their God, beliefs or mode of prayers.

When I became a professional, I scheduled my leisure time to read religious books. But my thoughts were limited. I did not question whether God was one or two or a million. But whenever there was a debate on the existence of God, I strongly supported God's existence and when Christians and Muslims debated on religious aspects, I stood on the side of the Christians to support Jesus's miracles!

But the moment I came to Saudi Arabia, my attitude towards the Arabs changed. My inner heart felt at peace. Respect developed for their Holy Book, the Holy Qur'an and their festivals. I eagerly awaited the arrival of Ramadhan. I was enchanted by the *Hajj* pilgrimage and would recite the *Thalbiyah* when *Hajj* arrived. I loved the Saudis and would side with them more and was ready to forgive and forget their faults more than I would side with them more and was ready to forgive and forget their faults more than I would of Indians. I could not explain why this was so, because on the outside I still remained a staunch Hindu and did not as yet have any

inclination to change my religion.

Whenever I heard the sentence, "Islam is the right religion," I dismissed it as an emotional outburst just as everybody says my mother is good, my country is good and my language is sweet and so on.

My marriage life was happy and with the arrival of my baby, I thought I had everything. Yet, my heart was thirsty for something beyond; for sure, it was not for worldly materials, but it was for spiritual happiness. Once, I opened my feelings to my husband. He advised me to open a creche or a school to divert my attention.

While on vacation in India, when I was studying the *Bhagwad Gita*, my mind was struck by four points: (1) Gita is emphasizing the importance of worshipping One True God. (2) Salvation of the soul can only be attained through worshipping the Eternal God. (3) Sub-gods are not the real gods. They are just obeying the order of the Eternal God. They (themselves) are powerless (4) The real and comprehensive knowledge is the knowledge of Eternal God or the knowing of Eternal God. Reading this, my heart was contented for a while.

In the meantime, I came to know that there are prayers which could be offered to the Eternal God, was the route to salvation, and known as the Purity of prayer. I searched for this Purity of prayer scouring many Hindu religious books like *Narayaniya*, *Ramadayaniya*, *Bhagavatha*, *Veda* and *Upanishads*. There were prayers, but they were scattered and not in order. My short stay did not allow me to search for more.

I visited a temple along with my family. A crowd of worshippers flocked to see the *Prathistha*. So did I. But when I looked at it, my heart was repelled by its sight. My heart was illuminated. It cried out: "This is only an idol. This is not God! My God is Eternal. He is beyond human imagination, He is the First and the Last."

Involuntarily, I asked God to forgive me for coming to the temple. There itself, I prostrated, not to the idol, but to the Eternal God. Thus ended my idol worshipping days!

A great desire to pray to the Eternal God was burning in me. I thought to myself, 'I have read the Bible with love and devotion. Why don't I read the Muslims' religious book with the same feeling.' I kept other religious books away from me a while and read the Holy Qur'an. And my search for the perfect religion ended with Islam. *Alhamdulillah*. At last, I had found the true religion and the true God and peace of mind as well! I sang a song: "Islam is the right religion, Purity of prayer is the Islamic prayer. Way to salvation is through Islam. The Sub-gods are not gods, they are angels!"

I kept reading the Verses of (*Surat Al-Hadeed*, 57:2,3):

"To Him belongs the dominion of the Heavens and the Earth: it is He who gives life and death. And He has power over all things. He is the First and Last, The Evident and Hidden, And He has the knowledge of all things."

I told my friends about my embracing Islam, but they did not understand. What I gained by way of peace of mind, I lost heavily in terms of what had been inherited and earned. My beautiful life was shattered into pieces. My little girl was harassed badly. My family was accused and my relatives turned into enemies. The youngsters became arrogant. Their respect turned to bitterness. My friends became my foes. The Christian groups were very restless. Some of them openly harassed me. The more I spoke about Islam, the more they hated me.

But two Christians helped me. They too were harassed by the rest of their group and insulted badly. My loving husband also turned against me. He published nasty stories in the newspapers and asked for public help. My days were filled with tears and pain, but thankfully, my heart was at peace.

When my next vacation arrived, I was stranded. Where to go? For pleasing Allah, I became an orphan. Nobody wanted me. But my suffering was lightened by the continuous care of my Muslim brothers and sisters. They protected me and gave me a secure place to stay and to work. *Alhamdulillah*, now my family is very big. It is the Islamic family! My community is the Islamic community. I am from the same first father, Adam (may peace be upon him!).

My fashion is *Hijab* and my motivation is the Holy Qur'an and my guiding light is the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). I found Islam. I love Islam and I want Islam forever.^[1]

Mona Panicker



Blessings of Islam!

My name is Nadia. I was born into the Russian orthodox faith. Very early in my life I started to question the ritualistic practices found in the Russian Orthodox Church. For instance, the priest in Russian school taught that God had forbidden the making of images, the worshipping of idols. Jesus Christ came to the Israeli peoples and said, "Make no images, worship no idols." Yet our church was full of pictures: images of saints, pictures of Jesus, the Holy Virgin, the disciples, various angels, and scenes of the crucifixion along with Christ's ascent to Heaven. The 'eye' of God was pictured above the altar. Whenever I asked about this discrepancy I was given various

answers which no matter how well-phrased, left concern in my small mind that there was an inconsistency between what God commanded and what was being done. The more intensely I questioned, the more emphatically I was told to accept that "true faith is blind." Somehow this did not sit well with me. In the Russian Orthodox Church the images not only cover the walls and are set up on pedestals, they are regularly kissed in reverence! Czar Nicholas' family is pictured on one of these images (called icons) as martyrs in the name of the church yet they were slain for political reasons. To me this depiction is preposterous. They were slain for purely political reasons and to have them be sainted seems a deficiency in someone's power to reason. Unfortunately this decision is a result of a high orthodox church authority. Thankfully, I do not know who.

In my church there were other practices which even as a young girl seemed wrong. As another example I will take the worship of saints. Saints are people who have given their lives in the cause of the church. Although I revere anyone and everyone who sacrifices in the name of the true God, I in no way can accept worship of a human being. I do not mean to say that these martyrs should not in any way be recognised. I just never felt that these saints should share in man's worship of God, or should be depicted on the walls of the church. So, saint worship is another thing that bothered me immensely since I was old enough to understand what the word 'worship' meant. My idea was that when I pray, when I worship, I worship God and I was told this was arrogance. Somehow I did not believe this. Is not my prayer more pleasing to God when I say it to Him directly? Perhaps my understanding of the saints depicted in my church as just now described by me will be challenged should any authority of the Orthodox Church read this. I can only say that my understandings are the direct result of my inquiries at a very early age. Since my teenage years I could not

^[1] Courtesy: *Young Muslim Digest* and reproduced from *Riyadh Daily*, Friday, August, 27, 1999, page 8.

even bring myself to pray to even Jesus Christ (may peace be upon him). I held the strong belief that my prayers will be addressed directly to God.

Anyone familiar with Christianity is acquainted with the rituals of communion and confession. Since I first understood the description of communion, I was unfortunately repulsed by it. I say unfortunately because somehow even to me now it seems unfortunate that I was unable to accept with grace what was told to me was Jesus' behest. The act, the explanation of the act, and the part taking of it to me seemed repugnant. Even now, after completely accepting Islam, I am ashamed of this admission. Another thing I found strange concerning communion is the serving of wine representing Christ's blood. Faith, without question, is an intoxicating thing. But the serving of an alcoholic beverage, in a place of worship to me is bizarre. The thought of orally receiving something representing Christ's body and blood for consumption was always loathsome to me and on the level of ritualistic cannibalism. This, of course, is my own personal view and in no way should reflect on the representation of the acceptance of Christ's doctrines. Man, unfortunately, according to his nature and with the help of Satan, has a way of misinterpreting/misrepresenting somethings that were no doubt meant to be otherwise.

Let me touch upon the ritual of confession. In the orthodox church in order to receive God's forgiveness for sin, you must go to the priest during a church service (not necessarily during the service, but this is how it is ordinarily done), and describe your sin (obviously in hopes of repentance and God's clemency). The priest then covers the head of the confessor with a part of his vestment and says a prescribed prayer asking for God's forgiveness of whatever transgression was confessed. Periodically, the priest imposes certain acts of penance which

must be fulfilled before God's clemency will be granted. I always questioned the power of the priest to decide which acts must be gone through by the sinner to receive God's forgiveness. I know that the degree of penance is probably dictated by Church authorities in proportion to the sins committed, but who is man to judge man in this respect? I've always believed that God and God alone should know man's sins, and God knows beyond the shadow of any doubt or distortion the sinner's intention and desire for true repentance. I quit going to ritualistic confession about ten years ago. Instead whenever I felt I have transgressed, I prayed in private to God telling him what He already knew and letting Him know that I recognized my sin, hoped for His mercy in judgement, and knew that God knew the degree of remorse in my heart.

That is how strong my own personal faith has been. On my own, without knowing it I was following many of the ways of Islam, for in Islam this is how confession is done. In everything I have said, again let me repeat that although I disagreed with the rituals of my church, my faith in God never wavered. Sometimes I, as everyone else with a sound mind, I am sure, have questioned my own beliefs and the correctness of my actions.

When I was about 9 or 10 years of age and I started strongly questioning many of the things I have just mentioned, my father started telling me a little about Islam. He was a strong professor of the Islamic faith and held great respect for Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Thanks to him I was able to overcome prejudices strongly ingrained in the Christian faith and to objectively look for the light of faith so I strongly sought for so long, which fortunately I have found in Islam. Among the many blessings bestowed upon me by Allah, I count the one that I found Islam as the

most valued.

Over the course of the past few years I have examined the Islamic faith and have found to my great surprise that what I believed has already been professed and the style of worship I believed in was being practiced by the Islamic peoples for centuries. This was not a disappointment, but an illuminating relief.

My views of Islam are idealistic since living in America I am isolated from a completely Islamic society. What I know and believe may, however, be somewhat less adulterated since I have not been exposed to any cultural overtones which doubtlessly tend to overshadow Islam due to the nature of man. Some may criticize this view. I tend to hold it in esteem. My views, by virtue of their idealism at this time, tend to be more pure since I am as yet untouched by anything other than the idealism I behold. I do not as yet know all about Islam, and I am still only a student of its practice.

I was surprised to learn recently on my first visit to Pakistan that women are banned from worshipping in mosques. Perhaps I do not fully appreciate the reasons, but to me this seems a corruption of Muhammad's (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) teachings as I at this time understand them. I strongly agree with the separation of men and women as I understand it in the Islamic faith, and this is a view I have held for a long time. There are natural differences which, in order to maintain dignity and order in society, must be respected. But to forbid women's worshipping in mosques I can accept as a cultural eccentricity, but not as a teaching of the revered Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!).

In all of the things I saw in my church, my faith in God never faltered. Rather I concluded that what I saw and what was being practiced simply did not correlate just because I did not

agree with certain ritualistic practices in no way diminished my reverence for the true God, Allah, and my desire to worship Him and Him alone in a way I felt to be pure and right.

After the conclusions which I came to within myself, after reading the Quran, after reading the Islamic literature which I have been fortunate enough to obtain in the United States, and after the small amount of very valued instruction I have received from a convert to Islam, I knew that to have not accepted the true faith of Islam was the same as being shown light and choosing to stay in darkness. I am convinced of the righteousness of my decision. I take pride in my choice. I will defend my decision with every ounce of strength and honor within me.⁽¹⁾

Nadia Shaukat Ali (U.S.A.)



WHY ISLAM

(Previously known as Indrani) and her husband, Bro. Rafiq (previously known as Chandara), shared with Sis. Muneerah Al-Idros their path towards embracing Islam

Indrani was six years old when her father died. Her mother stopped praying as she felt that God was not fair to make her a widow with five little children. Indrani and her brothers and sisters were brought up as nominal Hindus, as they had neither an altar nor pictures of gods in their house as many Hindus do.

When Indrani was 10 years old she began to love God and

⁽¹⁾ Courtesy: *Islamic Voice* (Bangalore, India) September 1993, page 17

collect pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses and worshipped them at home. She felt the need to pray and thought it was odd that, unlike other Hindu families, her family preformed very little Hindu rites.

During her teenage, Indrani started going to the temple thrice weekly. She encouraged some of her friends to go to the temple with her and became more interested in Hinduism.

She participated in *Bhajan* (devotional singing) activities and became a committee member in Ayyapan Group in Perumal Temple for several years.

Indrani became very ill. She consulted several doctors for treatment and was informed that there was nothing wrong with her but her illness persisted. She later consulted a *Swami* (a Hindu priest) to come and clear the *Sevanai* (evil spirits that may be dwelling in her.) The *Swami* and his assistant came to visit her. The assistant was Chandara, who was involved in her temple's religious rites and who had organized a religious trips to Malaysia for Indrani and her friends.

Indrani was very impressed with the knowledge the young man demonstrated while assisting the *Swami*.

After that visit to Indrani's house, Chandara dreamt of his favorite goddess, Kallamma, telling him to take Indrani as his bride. After much persuasion, his family then went on to ask for Indrani's hand in marriage.

Indrani and her family were pleasantly surprised by the marriage proposal. Indrani could hardly believe that her dreams of marrying a pious Hindu would come true.

Unlike Indrani, Chandara was brought up in a religious Hindu family. In fact, Chandara was the most religious in his family. He would often get into a trance, reciting the holy mantras in praise of the gods and goddesses who would possess him and speak through him. In Hinduism it is considered an honour to

be possessed by the gods or goddesses.

Chandara and other members of the group often got together to listen to the teachings of the *Swami*. They would also make house visits to chase evil spirits out of other people's bodies and house.

Chandara was appointed to be the *Swami's* assistant.

Indrani never entered a trance but has seen Chandara being possessed by the elephant god, *Vinayagar*. Chandara would behave exactly like an elephant, eating the fruits that the elephant ate.

When Chandara was in a trance, he would be approached to solve various problems. Those who approached him would prostrate before him for they regarded him as 'God.' the *Vibuthi* (white ashes) used to anoint the forehead would be brought to Chandara to be blessed.

During the Hindu festivals like *Pangani Utharam* and *Thaipusam*, the group would carry the *Kavadi* and walk on the fire pit.

Chandara had been involved in these festivals for about 10 years. Whenever he carried the *Kavadi* it would initially be painful, but with the chanting of holy words the pain would gradually subside, disappearing when he was in a trance. Not knowing what had taken place, he always asked those around him to observe him and after wards relate to him his actions.

Despite what he had gone through Chandara did not feel complete. Dissatisfied, he knew there was something not right in his life. He failed to see the light and always felt that his path was blocked by some kind of darkness which he wanted to clear so that he could reach the light. He knew that there were, 3,360 Hindu gods and he prayed to several of them.

Whenever he felt confused, he would go to the library to find out more about Hinduism. He learned from the elders but

knew there was still a lot more to learn. Many of the Hindu priests did not want to share anything they knew; knowledge was their rice bowl and they did not want their source of income to be taken away.

It was difficult to learn on your own about Hinduism, as most of the writings were in Sanskrit. Chandara could not find any holy books that satisfied his quest. All the books were written by different authors and each of them had different ideas about how and when Hinduism started. Even the *Bhagavat Geeta* (which emphasised more on *Vishnu*), *Ramayana* and *Mahabrahma* were very limited. These holy scriptures were more like literature books, teaching that we should do good and pray to the gods. Above all these gods is the female god who is the *Aadhi Parasakhti*. She controls the whole universe. The essence of Hinduism is to strive at getting a good reincarnation and to worship God and to pray to God through demigods.

During his search for enlightenment, Chandara was approached by a Christian missionary worker in Toa Payoh. He got involved in Christianity in the hope of enlightenment. However, he did not like Christianity, mainly due to the behavior of the people in the church; he noticed that young men and women were behaving indecently. Christianity was not what he was looking for and he withdrew.

Still, Chandara could no longer bring himself to pray to so many gods. He could worship only one God spiritually and worship the other idols physically, but he did not know who the one God was, Chandara occasionally still got into a trance. Chandara had curious Malay friends asking him about Hindu worship.

They did not tell him about Islam but they told him that unlike him they pray to only One God: Allah.

Chandara, who was the leader among his working mates, would go along with the Malays when they performed their *Zohr* prayer, waiting while they prayed. At the same time, he would pray to his God in his heart and ask for the right path.

Chandara was very impressed with the *Adhan*, which had a soothing effect on him.

The *Adhan* touched his heart so deeply, especially when it was followed by the prayer that his friends and other Muslims never failed to fulfil. He felt like it was so simple to recognise the true God. "Just worship him. Why does one need all these idols and mediators?" It did not take long before he felt it was Islam and Allah that he had been searching for.

After their marriage, his wife Indrani was still quite active with her temple activities. She became puzzled when her husband, a more pious Hindu than herself, used to hint repeatedly at the existence of one Almighty God, about praying to one God and that a true religion should not have many gods. Her mother-in-law felt that her previously pious son might have offended the gods.

Even after marriage, Chandara continued his search for enlightenment. He was trying to search for his One God in Hinduism, trying to know the One God he was praying to spiritually. He was no longer interested in any of the temple activities, no longer got into a trance. His mother, while in a trance, pointed out that her son's change in behaviour was due to his being under a charm.

Chandara did not know anything about Islam except that in Islam, God is One. He would meditate daily and *Uthrachamale* or *Zikr* (remembrance).

Usually he would be chanting the various gods' names. However, this time when he called out their names he felt something was wrong so he just said in English "Almighty God,

Almighty God...." In his meditation, he knew Muslims are praying to the true God.

Chandara's biggest problem in practicing Islam was Indrani. She didn't like Muslims and was active with her temple activities.

He tried to influence his wife on the teachings of Islam by turning on to the Malaysian Islamic programmes on television, like 'Pedoman.'

Indrani would complain that it was not necessary for her husband to take so much interest in Islam. He took this opportunity to express to her that he no longer believed in Hinduism, reasoning that it does not have a holy book and a basis of belief. Failing to find out how Hinduism started it merely seemed a culture full of complexity brought down by their ancestors.

He bought a translation of the Qur'an by Yusuf Ali and was deeply impressed when he read about the Prophets, of the beginning of mankind, and of heaven and hell. He found many things that are necessary for every human being to know in the Qur'an and encouraged Indrani to read it. When he read that idol worshippers will be thrown into hell, he had all the idols and pictures removed from their house.

Chandara now concentrated on learning more about Islam from various sources. He tried to learn more about Islam from his Malay friends. However, they usually could not give him answers to his questions. They suggested that he should seek the help of an *Ustadh* (a religion teacher). None of them took the initiative to take him to see any *Ustadh* until he met a member of the Al Arqam group. This person shared what he knew about Islam with Chandara.

But Chandara found some of the teachings of Al-Arqam were misleading; contrary to the teachings of Islam was the display

of pictures of their leaders.

Chandara started bringing home books on Islam, as well as on Christianity, Sikhism and Hinduism, telling his wife to read and make a comparison of these religions. Indrani was not interested because she was very satisfied with her belief, wanting only to concentrate on Hinduism and the idols. She told herself that there was no way he could influence her with his idea of One Almighty God and swore in her heart that she would bring him back to her way.

Indrani had no intentions of reading all these books of other religions which her husband had brought home one after another. Yet when she had trouble sleeping at night, something made her pick up the Qur'an and read it. Again and again, when she could not sleep, it was the Qur'an that she picked up and read. She felt so lost because she could no longer pray to the various Hindu deities: there were none in her house.

Indrani started to have dreams. During her first pregnancy, she dreamt of the Kaabah and saw a photo of Jesus, Prophet Isa, (may Allah peace be upon him!) in the Ka'bah. She related her dream to one of her Muslim colleagues, who then related Indrani's dream to her father. Indrani was fortunate to dream of the Kaabah, according to her colleague's father.

She also dreamt of Hindu gods giving her warnings and threats; but she had more dreams about Islam and pious Muslims.

She still continued to pray to her Hindu idols, but wondered why she dreamt of things that are related to Islam. When she was expecting her third daughter, she had a strange dream: she heard a voice coming from the open window of her bedroom; the voice said, "I am Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah. Follow my way and all evil will go away. If you want to know more, ask your husband."

She woke after this and when she went back to sleep, she had a

second dream. In this dream she saw herself telling her husband about her first dream and she asked him what that 'way' was and he told her to look down from the bedroom window. When she did, she saw Yusuf Islam dressed like an Arab giving a talk on Islam, surrounded by other people dressed like him. She had never seen Yusuf Islam before but she had heard of him and somehow, in her dream, she knew that it was him.

These dreams had created a very strong impact on Indrani's belief. She became more and more drawn towards Islam and she wanted to follow the way of Muhammad the Messenger of Allah (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!). In fact she wanted to accept Islam but was afraid because she was expecting her third child. She feared that something might befall her baby, remembering the threats that the Hindu deities had made in her dreams. After her delivery, Indrani told her husband that she was ready.

They were told about Darul Arqam, where they could register they had embraced Islam. Chandara refused, thinking Darul Arqam was the same as Al-Arqam. They went to *Jamiyah* instead, and registered their names as Mohamed Rafiq and Nishani.

When they announced they were Muslims they encountered a lot of problems, especially when Indrani started wearing the *Hijab*. Their parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends who used to be so dear to them now chided them.

All the friends Indrani had brought to Hinduism now refused to have anything to do with her, for fear that she may succeed in bringing them to Islam. They were very surprised because Indrani used to dislike Muslims more than they.

Indrani's parents warned her that her husband must have a hidden interest of having more than one wife.

Indrani and her husband, ostracised by their parents, missed the affections they previously received from them. She always told herself that, since Allah loves her so much, the sacrifice she was making in losing her family was nothing. She knows that no one loves her more than Allah.

Learned Hindus and gurus tried to bring Chandara back to Hinduism but he turned them down politely. They then severed their relationship with him.

Indrani's family swore to see that her children Nisha, Nafeesa and Natasha be brought back to Hinduism when they grow up, refusing to acknowledge their grandchildren's Muslim names. The children, now studying at the *Madrasah*, are very pleased with their religion. Chandara encourages them to wear the *Hijab* even though they are still young, wanting them to get used to veiling. The children like using the *Hijab* so much that they themselves refuse to remove it.

Despite being rejected by their families, Indrani and Chandara never gave up trying to improve their relationship. Today both Indrani's and Chandara's mothers have expressed that they have a filial son and daughter. *Alhamdulillah!*^[1]

Nishani (previously Indrani)



[1] Courtesy: *The Muslim Reader*, August-November, 1995; Vol. 13, No. 3 pages 6.8.9

My Journey from the Darkness of Unbelief to the Light of Islam

I was raised to believe in God from childhood. I attended church nearly every Sunday, went to Bible School, and sang in the choir. Yet religion was never a really big part of my life. There were times when I thought myself close to God.

I often prayed to him for guidance and strength in times of despair or for a wish in times of want. But I soon realized that this feeling of closeness soon evaporated when I was no longer begging God for something. I realized that even though I believed, I lacked faith. I perceived the world to be a game people were inspired to write a Bible and somehow people were able to find faith within this Bible.

As I grew older and became more aware of the world, I believed more in God. It was comfort to me to believe there was a supernatural force guiding and protecting man. At the age of 12, I began to give in depth thinking to my spirituality.

I realized there was a void in my life where a faith should be. Whenever I was in need or despair, I simply prayed to someone called Lord. But who was this Lord truly? I once asked my mother who to pray to, Jesus or God. Believing my mother to be right, I prayed to Jesus and to him I attributed all good things.

I have heard that religion cannot be argued. My friends and I tried to do this many times. I often had debates with my friends about Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. Through these debates I searched within myself more and more and decided I should do something about my emptiness. And so at the age of 13, I began my search for truth.

During this period of time my mother took notice of my behavior and from then on I have been in a 'religious phase.' My behavior was far from a phase. I simply shared my newly

gained knowledge with my family. I learned about the beliefs, practices, and doctrines within Christianity and minimal beliefs and practices within Judaism.

A few months within my search I realized that if I believe in Christianity I believed myself to be condemned to Hell. Not even considering the sins of my past, I was on a 'one way road to Hell' as southern ministers tend to say. I was told that by simply confessing Jesus to be my Lord and Savior I would be guaranteed eternal life in Heaven.

But not only did I lack belief, but I had many questions that I posed to every knowledgeable Christian I could find and never really did receive a satisfactory answer I did believe there was a God and that Jesus was sent to save humankind. That was it. My perplexity increased. My uncertainty increased. For fifteen years I had blindly followed a faith simply because it was the faith of my parents.

Something happened in my life in which the little faith I did have decreased to all but nothing. My search came to a stop. I no longer searched within myself, the Bible or church. I had given up for a while. I was a very bitter person until one day a friend gave me a book. It was called the *Muslim Christian Dialogue*. I took the book and read it. I am ashamed to say that during my searching never did I once consider another religion.

Christianity was all I knew, and I never thought about leaving it. My knowledge of Islam was very minimal. In fact, it was mainly filled with misconception and stereotypes. I asked for more books, I received them as well as pamphlets.

I learned about Islam from an intellectual aspect. I had a close friend who was Muslim and I often asked her questions about the practices. Never did I once consider Islam as my faith. Many things about Islam alienated me.

After a couple months of reading the month of Ramadan began. Every Friday when I could I join the local Muslim community for the breaking of the fast and the reciting of the Qur'an. I

posed questions that I may have come across to the Muslim girls. I was in awe at how someone could have so much certainty in what they believed and followed.

I felt myself drawn to the religion that alienated me. Having believed for so long that I was alone, Islam did comfort me in many ways. I wanted to be God — conscious. Most of all wanted a chance for heaven. I began to feel that Christianity did not give this to me, but Islam did.

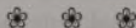
On March 19, 1997 after returning from a weekly class, I recited the *Shahadah* to myself. Then on March 26, I recited it before witnesses and became an official Muslim. I cannot express the joy I felt. I cannot express the weight that was lifted from my shoulders.

I had finally received my peace of mind. It has been about five months since I recited the *Shahadah*. Islam has made me a better person. I am stronger now and understand things better. My life has changed significantly. I now have purpose.

Striving to be a good Muslim in a Christian dominated society, is hard. Living with a Christian family is even harder. However, I do not try to get discouraged. I do not wish to dwell on my present predicament, but I believe that my *Jihad* is simply making me stronger. Someone once told me, that I am better off than some people who were born into Islam, in that I had to find, experience, and realized the greatness and mercy of Allah.

I have acquired the reasoning that seventy years of life on earth is nothing compared to eternal life in Paradise. I must admit that I lack the aptitude to express the greatness, mercy, and glory of Allah. I hope my account will help others who may feel the way I felt or struggle the way I struggled.^[1]

Natassia Kelly



^[1] Courtesy: Saudi Gazette, 2nd June, 2000, page 7.

How I chose Islam?

With many of the responses to the questionnaire came personal notes from the women scribbled in the margin regarding their appreciation of the opportunity to share their story or wanting to know about the responses of others. The following response is written in full to give a sample of one story in total. She expressed in a note: "writing this was an interesting experience — opening up the flood gates would be a good analogy!"

The woman is 35 years old, has three children, works part-time, has a Bachelor's degree, and has been Muslim 14 years.

Tell of your conversion to Islam

My conversion to Islam was a very long and gradual process. I was raised in a culturally Christian household, a place where the major holidays were celebrated but the deeper meanings left unexplored. This was intentional on the part of my parents who felt that much hatred had been done to the world in the name of organized religion. At the insistence of both sets of grandparents, we children were baptized and given some rudimentary Sunday school training. My parents told us that when we were grown we could pick our own religions, if indeed, we wanted a religion.

My religious training left me with a belief in God (how else could one explain all the wondrous interconnections and intricacies of earth and universe?) but no belief in any system of religion. I considered myself a Christian, but in a broad sense: belief in God, belief in Jesus as a Prophet, belief in the moral and ethical teachings. However, my upbringing engendered a high degree of skepticism and cynicism, and I

questioned every aspect of church dogma. In the end, I decided that I didn't believe in organized religion as it was illogical, internally inconsistent, and hypocritical (having sanctioned many unethical and immoral acts in the name of (God)).

However, I had a vague, almost unrecognized idea that without religion something essential was missing from life. A life lived without some sense of a higher purpose was just an empty, random chase after perpetually changing desires. So I began a rather half-hearted, disorganized search for my 'spiritual' self.

I saw glimpses of the spiritualism that I was looking for in various religions but they all seemed to be missing some essential ingredient. This one had a beautiful sense of peace and tolerance, but had lost its moral and ethical sense in the meantime. That one had a strong element of personal responsibility to others and a high code of personal conduct, but was repressive and suppressed logical inquiry. Another had a strong sense of religious collectiveness and historical context but promoted exclusivism. Still another understood the mystery, beauty, and peace that surrounds God, but was impractical about everyday matters and forgetful of our responsibilities to our fellow human beings. At about this time, I met the man who later became my husband and in trying to understand him and his culture, I came across Islam. Islam's ideas and teachings appealed to me immediately. They were coherent, they were logical, they were moderate, and they promoted a balance of personal responsibility and collective action. They were inclusive and yet outreaching. God was powerful and yet just; God was merciful and yet exacting. I took my *Shahada* the day my husband and I were married.

My conversion to Islam at first seemed to require no change in my life. My husband, having lived in the U.S for some years, and I, having been raised here, followed the cultural norm and separated our 'religious life' from our 'secular life.' The first

changes (noticeable to those around us) occurred as we began to raise a family and began to make decisions that affected our child and our life together. If there was one definable turning point in our commitment to God, it came when our oldest child was just three years old. I had a good friend who was a practicing Muslim and with whom I spent a great deal of time. My son was a keen observer and quite articulate for his age. One day around Christmas, he questioned why it was that we called ourselves Muslims if we did not do any of the (observable) things that Muslims do? He wanted to know why we had a Christmas tree. He wanted to know why I didn't wear a scarf.

I didn't have very good answers for him, and his questions prompted a complete evaluation of the role of religion in our lives. My husband and I debated the merits of raising children with or without a strong religious identity and examined how important we felt religion was for ourselves. In the end, we felt that a sense of religion was important for our child (ren) and, therefore, it was necessary for ourselves as well.

Over the next five years or so we adjusted ourselves and our lifestyle to be within Islamic parameters. Gradually we began to eat only *Halal* foods and avoided social situations that involved alcohol consumption by others. We began to fast Ramadan, to pray all of our prayers, to study the Qur'an, and became more involved in the Muslim community. Generally, becoming more conscious of Islam meant constantly re-evaluating ourselves and our surroundings. At times the constant evaluation felt constrictive, and we longed for the carefree days of the past where life was lived unthinkingly. However, these times were few, and we would never have seriously considered giving up all that we had gained by living Islam.

Living as a practicing Muslim has brought a sense of purpose to my life. There is a pervasive sense of serenity in the knowledge

that life is lived for a purpose. I feel that I have become a much better human being — more compassionate, more moderate, more deep-thinking. There is a richness and a calmness in my life that was not there prior to becoming a practicing Muslim. Life in its broadest sense had become one beautiful, intricate whole.

How I learned to live and practice as a Muslim

I learned to live as a Muslim primarily by reading the Qur'an and by asking questions of knowledgeable Muslims. I also watched and observed Muslims around me.

I learned how to pray by reading a book designed to guide new Muslims through the prayer. Any other questions I had, I asked other Muslims. I also drew upon sources and people in my husband's family. My mother-in-law and father-in-law were particularly helpful as were other relatives abroad who sent books or other resources as I needed them.

The ease or difficulty of taking on any specific Islamic practice has always been directly correlated to how I understood it in connection with what I already knew about Islam. If I didn't understand its significance or see its connection to the intricate 'whole' of Islam, I found it difficult to integrate into my life. When I had read enough, asked enough questions, talked enough, and finally understood, I didn't have a problem adding that practice into my life.

My Family of Origin

My becoming a practicing Muslim has had a very profound effect upon my relationship with my parents. My parents regard Islam quite negatively and consider it an oppressive, dogmatic religion. They don't hold religion, in general, in very high esteem and regard Islam, in particular, to be very oppressive of women. However, my only sibling, my sister, is quite supportive of my choice.

I hope that in the future, I might be able to sit and talk with my parents about Islam and its role in my life. We have attempted to discuss it many times but have made very little progress. They seem unable to understand that being Muslim brings me peace and joy and has added immeasurable depth to my life. Islam has not taken anything away from who I am, but has only added to it. My parents seem to regard my choice only as rejection of them and a rejection of my heritage. They believe that I have committed a form of cultural apostasy and blame themselves. They believe that they failed me — failed to give me strong self-esteem and failed to involve me fully in my own culture. I hope that one day they will accept my choice — perhaps not understand it, but accept it.

There are many points of stress between myself and my parents regarding Islam. They dislike anything that physically marks me (or my children) as 'different' (read 'Muslim'). They are uncomfortable going out in public with me or my daughters because we wear *Hijab* (myself) or modest clothing (my daughters wear pants under their dresses). They were upset when we asked them to stop drinking alcohol in our house when they visited us. They used to bring it with them. They try not to take a picture of me if I have on my scarf. They don't like our children's Muslim names and argued greatly with me about it when our first child was born. My parents are uncomfortable with my husband's and my insistence that family comes first — they feel that I have sold myself short by staying home (although I do work part-time!) and being family-oriented. They wished a 'career' for me. They are uncomfortable with our world outlook and find it to be impractical and idealistic. Except for the fact that they believe we are too conservative, they think we are too politically correct. Frankly, most of the time, I am not sure exactly what they think about me, because they never discuss it openly. I do know from the uncomfortable, explosive, and divisive conversations we have

had, that they disapprove of and are disappointed with my choices in life. They can't, however, ever seem to tell me Why. I believe it is because they are unable to argue against something that is ethical, moral, moderate and logical — and is something that they taught me to believe in since I was a small child (only they didn't call it 'Islam').

In our holiday celebrations, we attempted with our first-born to continue celebrating Christmas with my parents. We changed the emphasis to "helping Grandma and Grandpa celebrate their holiday" and also spoke about the importance of Prophet Jesus (may peace be upon him!) in Islam. It didn't work for many different reasons. Our child was too young to really be able to make that distinction, and peer pressure to be like all the other Christmas celebrants pushed him toward the popular idea of Christmas. My parents used Christmas to push American culture at him creating an 'us versus them' environment and creating confusion and tension in our child. As our next children were born we realized that we didn't want these same scenes replicated with them, and so we gradually stopped going to my parents' house for Christmas. It was a decision that both disappointed and angered my parents. They now celebrate Christmas with my sister and her children and husband.

We do send Christmas cards to my parents, my sister, and my surviving grandparent, wish them a Happy New Year, and call them on Christmas Day. We also send my family letters or cards on *Eid al-Fitr* after Ramadan. My family sends us cards at Christmas and my sister also calls several times during Ramadan to see how we are doing. The other Christian holidays (e.g. Easter) were not celebrated in my family as I was growing up and are not a factor now. My mom sends all the grandchildren cards at Halloween (which we do not celebrate but overlook in deference to my parents), Valentine's Day, and on their birthdays.

We would love to include my parents in our Islamic celebrations, but they are not comfortable with the idea. They will not accompany us to any gatherings with our Muslim friends, if they happen to be visiting us, and in deference to my parents, we usually stay home unless it is impossible to get out of the activity.

We have many difficulties when we visit my parents, most springing from their disapproval of our lifestyle. Our world views are quite different — from politics to the role of 'independence and materialism' in a person's life. We do have many good times with my parents and want a close and mutually respectful relationship with them.

My Husband

I met my husband while I was in college, through mutual friends. The characteristics which most attracted me were his generosity of spirit, honesty, compassion, loyalty, intelligence, and his general strength of character. He knew who and what he was and yet he was humble. I greatly admired his strength of character and his generosity to others. He was very accepting and gentle and yet there was strength inside.

My husband had a large role in my conversion to Islam because he was able to answer all my questions, and he spent a great deal of time explaining both Islam and his culture to me. He always included me in all his Islamic or cultural activities and acted as my interpreter, linguistically and culturally. He made Islam available for me and helped me to experience it firsthand. He never, at any point, pressured me to convert. The decision was entirely mine.

My family didn't accept him very well as my 'friend' but were fine after we became 'engaged.' They like him immensely as a human being but blame him for brainwashing me into becoming a Muslim. They also blame me for being so

gullible. Our relationship with my parents was very good until we became practicing Muslims. We were married in a civil ceremony at the country courthouse and by proxy in Iran (so that relatives who were 'clergy' could perform the ceremony for us). Our civil ceremony contained no Islamic elements and our Islamic ceremony was very basic: the marriage contract, the intent (declaration of desire) to be married, the public announcement of our marriage.

The Homeland of My Husband

We try to run our household on an Islamic model and to the extent that Iranian culture is basically an Islamic culture, our household reflects it. We speak Farsi at home and eat mostly Iranian food although tacos, spaghetti, and stir-fry are big favorites (along with roasts and hamburgers). We intend to live in the U.S. for the foreseeable future due to the economic situation in Iran and because we have student loans to repay in this country. We feel that we cannot forsake our debts here, and we could never afford to both live and pay off our loans if we lived in Iran. We have considered moving to another Middle Eastern country. My husband is an Iranian citizen.

My Husband's Family

I have met all the members of my husband's immediate family and some members of the (immense) extended family. I met my mother-in-law and father-in-law before we married, when they visited the United States for a summer. They accepted me very well, although it must have been difficult for them since they are very traditional Muslims and I was your typical twenty-year-old college co-ed. I have been accepted wonderfully by my in-laws although they have disagreed with the way we have done many things, e.g., getting married as undergrads and having three children while my husband was still in a graduate school. However, they have never belabored their concerns. My

in-laws lived with us for about a year and then moved down the block for the next year after that. It was a great experience, although it had both its ups and downs! I expect that should we move to Iran, I would fit in fairly well and that I would be graciously accepted by the extended family. I might have a few problems with Iranian culture particularly in those areas which deviate from Islamic norms. Any problems from the extended family might arise from my independence and self-reliance.

I have learned a great deal from my in-laws. They have a wonderful way of relating to their children, a way which engenders respect for others and great amount of self-esteem. It is interesting to see how a child-oriented and religious-oriented culture operates. My in-laws, by virtue of being a contrast to American culture, have given me a great appreciation for certain elements of my American cultural identity. From all my comparing and contrasting of Iranian and American cultures, I have seen that Islam is truly correct in saying that moderation in all is the right path!

My Position as a Woman

As a Muslim woman I experience the full benefits given to me by God as a member of the human race. I am responsible only to God for how I live my life, and how well I fulfill my duties to Him. The most important right which I enjoy by benefit of being a Muslim woman is the right of equality before God. Among the other rights which are detailed for women in Islam are the right to earn and keep our own money, to retain and / or dispose of our own property, the right to inherit, the right to initiate and contest a divorce, the right to an education, the right to retain our own name after marriage, the right to participate in choosing our own mates, the right to custody of our children.

However, as Islam is a just and fair religion, along with my rights come my obligations. All levels of Islamic society —

including the individual and on through the relationships of husband / wife, parent / child, employer / employee, and the society / societal member — are firmly connected by interlocking and mutually reciprocal rights and duties. A right does not exist without a corresponding duty; a duty does not exist without a corresponding right. As an example: it is one of my rights as a wife to be financially supported by my husband—that is his obligation. Among others, my obligation is to try and live within his financial means without complaint, derision, or greed, and to care for his property and assets in his absence. My husband is obligated to treat me with courtesy and respect, and I am obliged to do the same for him. As a member of a society, I am obliged to help my fellow members, and they and the societal bureaucracy at large are obligated to help me in my times of need. There is much misunderstanding on the part of non-Muslims (and some Muslims) regarding the absolute inter-connectedness of rights and obligations — they come as a unit and cannot be separated out to be viewed separately without losing their essential qualities.

I feel no apprehension about my position as a Muslim woman in my marriage. I do not feel that there are any areas of private or public endeavor that are closed to me. I do have concerns regarding the status of some women in those societies and within those marriages where there is ignorance of or misunderstanding of the teachings of Islam. There exist many Muslim societies where deviations from the Islamic norms regarding the status and role of women (as well as other issues) have resulted in a constriction of the role of women. 'Cultural Islam' very often is at variance with Islam. Verses from the Qur'an and *Hadith* of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) are often taken out of their context of revelation or transmission and used to support patriarchal cultural viewpoints. Both men and women are often uneducated as to the true meanings of Islamic injunctions and, by default, follow the standard cultural practice of their societies.

Child Rearing

My child-rearing techniques are directly influenced by being a Muslim. Islam touches all parts of my life and as such I try to raise my children in the most Islamic way possible. My children came into this world as Muslims, innocent and submissive to the will of Allah. It is our great responsibility, indeed both a trust and a test from Allah, that my husband and I raise them to remain Muslim.

The most easily observable Islamic influences on our child-rearing techniques include encouraging the children to follow us in prayer, teaching them Qur'anic Verses, using traditional Muslim greetings and everyday phrases, encouraging them to dress modestly and behave with compassion and kindness. We use a lot of modeling and verbal encouragement and reminding, but the children are never forced to join us in any given activity as Islam teaches that there is no compulsion in religion. We do, if necessary, insist that the children remain near our activity (while quietly occupying themselves) so that at least they have exposure to the activity and understand that there are some minimal family standards that they must adhere to. We try to be tactful and discreet when enforcing these standards to avoid provoking outright rebellion.

The major way in which Islam influences my child-rearing techniques is that I try to remember that I am always within Allah's sight. Allah has set high standards of personal behavior for humans, not because He is vengeful, but because He knows that we are capable of rising to meet those standards. I am also always aware that my two recording angels are ever watchful! I try to be patient (this one can be quite difficult!), polite, and respectful; and to act with compassion, sincerity, and understanding towards them [the children]. I encourage them to value education and view learning as a life-long endeavor that is not limited to school hours or 'school topics.' We put

great emphasis on doing their personal best at school and elsewhere; to be helpful and kind; not to lie or cheat; to value Allah (and therefore Islam), their family, and their fellow human beings; to stand up for what they believe in, to combine personal piety with outward action; to be sincere and straightforward; and to be generous in thought as well as in action. We also try to view each child as an individual, to view them outside of the influence of birth order, to try not to compare them to their siblings or to ourselves, to try to accept and value those personality traits that are irritating to us but part and parcel of who they are.

In Sha' Allah, our children will grow to be compassionate, productive Muslims. To that end we are always re-evaluating our progress and our child-rearing techniques. We always try to follow the specific Islamic injunctions, but also attempt to follow the 'spirit of the law.'

My husband is very involved with the care of the children. I work part-time, and while I am at work he is their sole caretaker. He also is with the children when I go to meetings or study groups. He takes the kids to the doctors, takes them out on excursions, takes them on errands, goes to the swimming pool with them, and any number of other activities.

My rights and obligations with my children? When people mention Islam/mothers/mother's rights, they are usually referring to child custody in the event of a divorce. Both my husband, and I are of the opinion that the children should go with, whichever parent is better able to care for them. Of course, in Islam, divorce is allowed, but exhaustive efforts to keep the family unit intact should be made first. In most cases, it is the mother who is better emotionally equipped to raise the children. Unless circumstances warrant differently, the non-custodial parent has the right to frequent visitation. The custodial parent should be helped financially to raise the

children, if it is necessary. All divorces should take place in an Islamic family court with a qualified jurist making the decision.

My obligation to my children is to love them, respect them, and help them grow to be Muslim adults. This is as much an obligation to my children as it is to Allah, who placed these children in my care as a trust from Him. I am obliged to remember that my children belong to Allah, not to me — and I must treat them accordingly.

As specified in the Qur'an, my children's obligations to me are that they should respect me (but I must be worthy of that respect), obey me (as long as I am within the bounds of Islam in my request), and care for me if I attain old age. They have the right to expect love, good physical care, and guidance from me. They have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, as I do.

What I Would Like to Express to Others

I would like the American public to know that I am a Muslim by personal choice. I am a fully mature, intelligent human being, capable of making rational decisions. My decision to embrace Islam is not an effort to fit into my husband's culture or family, it is not the result of too little self — esteem; it is not the result of pressure from my husband. I would also like people to understand that Islam is not repressive of women, it does not condone terrorism, and that it is squarely within the Judeo-Christian tradition. I would like people to realize that Islam stands for moderation and modesty and that there are often great discrepancies between the practices of 'cultural Islam' and the directives of Islam.^[1]

An American Woman's conversion story

^[1] Courtesy : *Daughters of Another Path*, by Carol L. Anway, Yawana Publications, U.S.A., 1995, pages 185-195.

I am a Muslim woman

I am a Muslim woman, which in this society is easier said than done. In the old days, before I was Rabi'a, I ate Sherman's Bar-B-Que, drank Cream White Concord, smoked Panama Red, Acapulco Gold, Cheba-Cheba (I was a connoisseur), wore minis, was fly, and changed boy friends as often as was fashionable.

Those were the simple, though not necessarily good days of my life. A baby was on the way, father gone—a consequence which seems to be inherently part of Black womanhood. Somehow, I forgot to organize my life. I had turned Islam over in my mind, more than once. I knew there was a God. Logic told me that if I could breathe air that I could not see, touch, or smell, then there was nothing abstract about believing in a God I couldn't see. There was never any question in my mind of returning to church. After all the hand-clapping, foot-stomping rocking to that old time gospel, we all went home to spend another week in Hell. My options boiled down to the Nation of Islam, and the *Sunni* (orthodox) Muslims. Elijah teaches that the Black man is God. After considering the deplorable state of the Black man, I realized that I couldn't follow Elijah. (I've never heard God called a masochist). My decision, then, was clear; it was orthodox Islam or nothing.

I sat facing *Imam* K. Ahmad Tawfiq one Friday afternoon and repeated the following: "*Ash-hadu an la ilaha illa llahu wa ash-hadu anna Muhamadan abduhu wa Rasuluhu...*" What does it mean? What it has come to mean in recent times is my own brand of revolution-change. Radical change, not from the outside in, but the inside out. My life has become not just another ball game, but an entirely new sport. However, the major ground rule in this sport is no cheating. Islam, in the most profound sense, is no game at all. The cheater only loses,

and the winner is always right.

With the usual zeal, I began haunting Muslim bookstores, liberating library books, and pestering every Muslim I met with a thousand and one questions. Unfortunately, people were not very tolerant of some of my uninformed and some times stupid questions. I left New York in an arrogant huff and settled, or tried to, in Jersey.

Here I found the quiet, but where would I find the peace? Here I found out what prayer is. If you live in the same world as I do, then you know it to be a place where people eat children for breakfast, kill and rape women for lunch, and castrate men for dinner. If, in such a world where crackers sell their mothers and niggers kill their brothers, there is no need for God and prayer, then there will never be. To stop in the course of a day, run from the madness and noise, find that quiet place, pray — this is me. The place is quiet — the peace is prayer, knowing what is sad and good, knowing that, ultimately, no one matters except the Creator. With this as my armour, I go to do battle with my interrogators — you.

"Why you wear them clothes? What's with parties? How can you marry a man you don't know?"

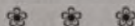
To cover our beauty in modesty; it is a drag to go some place where people do all the things which you are forbidden; and I haven't seen too many 'madly-in — love-have-known-him-for-years marriages' work lately, so maybe it's time for a change. Perhaps it is advantageous, to some degree, to marry a man you have known for some time. Be that as it may.

One of the most important elements of any marriage, which Islam emphasized, is the maintenance of peace. When such peace is unbalanced beyond resolution, the Muslim marriage is dissolved.

And what about equality? Woman does have a 'place', if you

will. But so does man! Man must follow the *Imam* (leader), woman follows man, and child follows woman. We are equals in much the same way as a three and four star general. Both are leaders with rank, both respected; however, one has a little more responsibility and final say than the other. Man, in the role designed for him, is provider and teacher of woman, is the four star general. The Qur'an tells me that on Judgement Day, men will be questioned about their wives, and the women about their children. Such is the question of roles in Islam — not what is, or which one, but how to.^[1]

Rabi'a K. Jabbar



Proud to be a Muslim woman *Hijab* a liberator; not an enslaver

Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; to cover their adornments except such as are normally displayed, and to draw there veils over their bosoms. (*Surat An-Nur*, 24:31)

It seems that lots of people are unaware of the obligation of the veil in the Qur'an. A lot of totally unfounded opposition exist to women covering themselves according to the requirements of the Qur'an as explained in the above verse.

^[1] Courtsey: *The Straight Path*; January-March 1992, page 22 and *Yaqeen International*, Karachi (Pakistan) June 7-22-1992, page 22. After embracing Islam; the Path of Truth, sister Rabi'a said: 'I had turned Islam over in my mind: My life has become entirely new spot; and I have experienced radical change not from the outside in, but inside out.' — Editor

If fighting stereotypes is Muslims' biggest battle, it is women who are on the front line. In Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia, wearing a veil is the law. In the United States, it's a statement. "For some young women, the veil in America works a bit like the Afro during the blackpower era," says Mohja Kahf, a professor at the University of Arkansas.

At her wedding eight years ago, Amanny Khattab wore an Islamic veil under her translucent lace tulle one. She remembers the 'living hell' of her freshman year at Farmingdale High School on New York's Long Island. "The week before school started, I bought all the cool stuff: Reebok sneakers, Guess! Jeans," recalls Khattab. "I wanted to look just like everybody else, but with the scarf." It didn't work. But enduring all the cracks — 'towel-head,' 'rag-head' — made her tough. "Non-Muslim women think I'm oppressed because I wear too much," says Khattab. "Well, I think they're — oppressed because they wear too little."

For some Muslim women, the veil is viewed as a means by which a woman can function in society without being a slave to her femininity. This belief stems from the assumption that society, especially the male portion, has a flawed perception of women. This would be a society which believes a woman's primary function is dictated by their physical attributes: a belief many women would have to give some considerable credit.

Now consider a different point of view: *Hijab* as a liberating force. Nobody will be distracted by my beauty. I refuse to offer these distractions to a perverse society. "You will be utterly riveted by my mind. If wearing this scarf is what it takes to get you to focus your attention on me, and nothing else, then this is the very small price I am willing to pay. I am not deluded enough to think that I can deal with this societal problem of judging people — especially women based on their looks,

Hence I will deal with my society as I deem best.

Now let us sit back for a minute and really think. The logic in this rings true; we can all relate to this from one experience or another. Whether it was in high school, college or in the work place, we have always felt that external attributes will be a factor in our success or failure as a person. One woman, a graduate student in religious studies at Duke University, gives reasons of feminism and religion for wearing *Hijab*. She feels women are deceived into thinking they dress up and put on makeup for themselves when it's actually for men. I used to focus a lot on my body and it took me a while not to feel ugly, when I was wearing *Hijab*. But it creates an atmosphere where there is less emphasis on the physical aspect; it lends itself to relationship of mutual respect.

In France, a democratic country like the US, a group of women were discriminated against on the basis of the way they were dressed, which happened to reflect their religious beliefs. They were not wearing swastikas or other symbols of hatred: they were merely covering their hair with scarves. They were dismissed from school for wearing *Hijab*.

After studying the Qur'an to learn how to convert Muslims to her religion, Amina Assilmi says she herself converted to Islam because she realized it have come from God.

"This veil warns people up front that I am not a woman to be messed with," says Assilmi. "It shows that I am a woman with a mind and that I know I am more than a body."

Like women, men also have a proper way of dressing according to the Qur'an, which says, "they must dress with modesty at all times.

In no way, does this veil equal oppression and we don't want you to feel sorry for us."

Assilmi said the Qur'an, gave women rights 1,400 years ago

that they are still fighting for around the world today. These include the right to be heard and to have ideas accepted regardless of gender.

Islam is liberating in ways you couldn't imagine unless you took the time to get to know it.

The next time you see a woman wearing *Hijab*, do not wince at the so-called symbol of submissiveness you may feel she represents. She might be my friend, and I can assure you she is not a fanatic. She has made a choice and the beauty of it all is that she had the courage to show it.^[1]

Rosina Samadani



When minds are ventilated by liberty and rationality

No matter, how expertly Christianity or any other religion may be presented, no matter how deeply indoctrinated one might be, it will never make an impression on one who is committed to finding the truth.

I was born and grew up in a Christian home. I attended a Catholic school and led a 'carefree' Christian life like most white Christian girls in South Africa. I knew no fear. My life was exciting, eventful and full of opportunities... but I gave little thought to my Creator and the purpose of my life on this earth. I did, however, feel a desire to have a closer relationship

^[1] Courtesy: *Saudi Gazette*: The Message Friday, 27th November 1998, page 9.

with God, but I conveniently placed this thought last on my list of priorities.

During all of my school-days spent under the guidance and supervision of nuns at the convent, I could never acquire a sound knowledge of the Bible, or the history and origin of Christianity. Religious lessons consisted of the same old Bible chapters being repeated. No mention at all was made of Islam or Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!). In fact, other religions as a subject are not included in the South African educational curriculum. Young minds, thus, are insulated and never given the chance to expand and be ventilated by the refreshing air of liberty and rationality.

I began to realise that though my life was enjoyable, there was a spiritual desideratum (something essential or missing) in my life's make up. I felt that there had to be a more complete and meaningful way of life, but did not know how to find it. Eventually, I resorted to an in-depth study of various religions, e.g. Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, etc. But to my great fortune, I discovered Islam, as one suddenly finds a scintillating diamond on the road while walking aimlessly along the path of uncertainty.

Islam came to me as a modern-day 'messenger'. What appealed to me most about Islam was that it allowed no compromise with untruth, antiquated beliefs, superstitions and all kinds of irrationalities. It was a simple, straightforward, uncomplicated way of life. The most outstanding feature of Islam is that though it evolved to its perfect form some 1,400 years ago, it correlates completely with the scientifically advanced modern world.

My conversion to Islam was not immediate. It took over a year of intense studying and asking questions before I finally accepted it as the final religion (*Deen*), and Muhammad (may

the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) as the Seal of the Prophets.

One of the first discoveries I made was that I had two different concepts of God. As a Christian, I viewed God as a soft, lenient, undemanding Being, allowing us to do as we pleased, waiting hopefully for us to turn to Him. It was the Doctrine of Atonement that I could never accept. When questioned it, I was given circuitous, tortuous, circumambulatory, and nebulous answers that confused me even more.

As I became more inclined towards Islam, I regarded Allah as a Great Power, a loving but Firm Being Who demanded discipline, Who was not going to give us the easy way out by alluding us that someone else had died for our sins. Allah, the Only One True God, told us in no uncertain terms that we ourselves are responsible for our own actions and He will reward or punish us accordingly.

What struck me most in my study of the life of Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) was the perfect example he set for his followers who loved him so much that they would have given their lives for his safety. I drew a comparison between Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) and Jesus (may peace be upon him). According to the Bible, Jesus's (may peace be upon him!) closest followers denied him after the supposed crucifixion. This was never the case with Muhammad's (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) followers.

Comparing the two Prophets, I understood why Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) was the Seal of Prophets. Jesus's (may peace be upon him!) mission was- as he himself said-for "the lost sheep of the House of Israel," whereas Muhammad's (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) mission was universal, that is, for all mankind Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be

upon him!) gave us a complete code of life which he himself lived according to the dictates of the Qur'an, whereas Jesus's (may peace be upon him!) life was incomplete. He did not teach us how to live our lives and conduct our affairs on this earth as Muhammed (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) did. Jesus (may peace be upon him!) was emphatic that his kingdom was not of this world.

The Qur'an made a profound impression on me. It is pure, unadulterated Word of Allah, and is not polluted by men as is the case with the Bible which is interpolated, altered, added to and subtracted from by men. The original Word of Allah as revealed to Jesus (may peace be upon him!) is not in existence today.

It was not one particular facet or a few aspects of Islam that led to my conversion. It was Islam as a whole, which convinced me, and made me decide that there is no religion on earth that can even remotely touch Islam in beauty and simplicity.

It is a bit difficult for a person who has reverted to Islam to practice it successfully in a non-Islamic environment.

I, however, was fortunate that I married into a truly Islamic family — not the kind of people who accidentally inherited Islam and treat it casually and with indifference; nor the kind of Muslims who merely talk as 'authorities' about Islam while behind that image indulge in all kinds of evils. I married into a family that has Islam in their hearts; who are disciplined Muslims; who practise what they preach.

Living as a Muslim, I now have a far greater knowledge of Allah. I live in constant awareness of the day of *Qiyamah* (Reckoning). Life is a bliss because I now have a purpose for living on this earth. I have discovered a new meaning to life which I did not have when I was a Christian. I found that love and service to fellow humans is the quintessence of Islam — which can be considered as an acronym for "I Shall Love All Mankind!"

Yusuf Islam (former singer Cat Stevens) motivated and influenced my desire to discover Islam, after my husband mentioned his conversion to me.

My parents are curious about Islam but show no interest in further inquiry. My friends declare, "We are Catholic born and Catholic to stay."

My domestic ambition is to lead my four year-old daughter Taskeen and my two year-old son Siraj to read the Qur'an. I'd like to introduce my children to elementary steps of Islamic education and fill them with the fear of Allah to establish sound moral values in a Western, anti-Islamic dominated world.^[1]

Sabiha Khan (formerly Carole Botes, South Africa)



I realized that what I had searched for Was Islam!

This is the 'Journey to Islam' story of sister Shahin Gulfam-Mol, a Dutch Muslim lady, who spent so many years in search of peace and tranquility and spiritual satisfaction. She belonged to a Protestant family and her previous name was Carrine. She considered herself a good Christian but when she found some doubts regarding her faith in Christianity, she started studying Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. She never thought about Islam because 'the media propagated such a negative image of Islam that it never appealed to her'. She thought Muslims were

^[1] Courtesy: *Saudi Gazette* 15th March, 1996 on page 7.

cruel, uneducated fanatics'. Her view about women was more dismal. There were certain reasons behind it. Slowly her views changed and while in the U.S.A., she had contact with Muslims. On her return to her motherland, she started reading Arabic, Islamic history and culture. Consequently, she was impressed by Islamic teachings through Gulfam Mol, a Pakistani hospital worker. As a result, she embraced Islam in 1976.

She is often asked about the way Muslim women dress, and has this to say: "In the West a woman dresses up beautifully when going out, showing off as much of herself as possible. Her husband is proud to show off her beauty to everyone.

In Islam, it is exactly the opposite. When she goes out, the woman covers up, for her beauty is only for the enjoyment of her husband. This is much more practical and logical: and does it not help to prevent a promiscuous society?"

Her level gaze holds a tranquillity and an enviable peace of mind most people strive for all their lives without much success. But serenity did not come easy for Shahin Gulfam Mol. It took this Dutch Muslim many years of in-depth soul searching which led to Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism before she found her niche in Islam.

Raised as a Protestant, Shahin (then called Corrine) regarded herself as a good Christian. But at 16, she suddenly found herself doubting her faith, "I believed in God, but somehow I could not believe in Jesus being the Son of God. This disturbed me as I thought I was being unfaithful." She says.

More troubling was the fact that her faith seemed inexplicably unfulfilled. Which was why she started searching for answers by studying other religions, without any success.

Islam never even came into consideration. Says Shahin: "The media propagates such a negative image of Islam that it never

appealed to me. I thought Muslims were cruel, uneducated fanatics."

Her view of Muslim women was even more dismal. "I thought they were totally oppressed walking behind their husbands, never going out alone, covering themselves from head to toe and generally having very little to say for themselves. In any case, the Muslims I met were either not practising Muslims, or whatever they told me was so superficial that I was never motivated by it."

But slowly her view would change. While working at a hospital, Shahin was given a *Musallah* (prayer-rug) by one of the Muslim staff members. Having no idea what it was or how it was used, she thought it rather beautiful and hung it on her wall.

Shortly thereafter, she visited the United States where she briefly worked in a hospital cafeteria. Again she came into direct contact with Muslims.

"It was the month of Ramadan," she recalls. "I watched in amazement as this handful of Muslims abstained from food and drinks for the whole day until dusk fell. It was these small things which impressed me."

With a new found interest in Islam, Shahin returned home and started her studies at the university.

One of her subjects was Arabic, which subsequently got her into reading more on Islamic history and culture. It was during this phase that she met Gulfam Mol, a Pakistani hospital worker.

"We started to talk and when he asked me my name, I wrote it down in Arabic. He was very impressed," she grins. It was Gulfam who encouraged her to study Islam. "He was the first Muslim who tried to teach me the religious aspects of Islam like *Towuhid* (belief in the Oneness of Allah) and *Taharah* (cleanliness)."

And yet, when Gulfam proposed and asked her if she would embrace Islam, the Dutch girl felt unsure. "I did not know if I could make such a final commitment. I thought I was a good Christian (in spite of my doubts). To me, change of religion had to come from within, not just because I was marrying a Muslim."

Despite her doubts, she agreed to marry the Pakistani and embraced Islam in 1976. However, her conversion was not wholehearted. Shahin still could not feel the conviction of her new religion in her heart.

It took her two years to reach the point where she could no longer deny Islam. "I realised that what I had searched for and believed in for so long, was exactly what Islam was teaching I could no longer say no to it. I had to commit to it fully."

It was at that moment that the pale-eyed mother of three made her transition from Corrine to Shahin and became a true Muslim.

Her parents were none too happy. Says the soft-spoken former secretary: "It was very difficult for them. Islam was foreign to them. They feared that I would be an oppressed wife. They barely knew Gulfam; they did not even know if they liked him."

But most of all, her parents were ashamed to admit that their daughter had become a Muslim. It took them a while, but today they have accepted it fully.

Did she ever have doubts about her marriage? Shahin replies quietly. "The Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) said the best man is he who is best to his wife. With a husband who is a practicing Muslim, what other security or guarantee did I need for my marriage?"

Her strict principles and conservative dress code did not hold Shahin back from professional success. Having worked at an

airline for the last 15 years, she is now the Personal Assistant to a Manager. Her conversion may have surprised her colleagues, but they were very thoughtful, she says.

"When I returned to work (after my conversion), my boss questioned me on my religion and the requirements needed at work. When I told him about the *Salaah* (Prayer), he led me to a small room which he had already prepared for me as a prayer section. *Qiblah* (prayer direction) and all. "She raises a slim hand. "*Alhamdulillah* (thanks be to Allah). This was another mercy from Allah".

Her soft voice fills with awe. "Men and women are equal, yes, but different," she stresses.

"Islam respects women as women, not as imitators of men. Today women would rather die than admit that they are housewives, because they are ashamed of such a traditional role. Islam gives each the capacity to develop in a particular way. If your capacity is to be a wife and mother, why be ashamed of it?" she asks passionately.

"But on the other hand, we have the example of the Prophet's (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) wife, Khadija. She not only employed him, but also proposed to him. Even in this day and age, Western women are still reluctant to be this assertive. What other example do we need of female equality?"

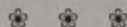
She is often asked about the way Muslim women dress and has this to say: "In the west a women dresses up beautifully when going out, showing off as much of herself as possible. Her husband is proud to show off her beauty to everyone.

In Islam, it is exactly the opposite. When she goes out, the woman covers up, for her beauty is only for the enjoyment of her husband. This is much more practical and logical: and does it not help to prevent a promiscuous society?"

If Shahin Gulam Mol has one wish, then it is for Muslim women in *Hijab* to receive the same respect that nuns experience. "Nuns are never questioned on their dress code, but we are," she says. "They are simply accepted as women of religion, knowledge and compassion — women who help society regardless of sex, race, colour or creed."

To this end, she feels that their first priority is to educate the women. "The Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) said to educate a woman is to educate a nation." Then we need to find the right role models — not the heavily made-up, scantily clad, feminist Western women who must deny her womanhood to be a professional success. Instead, we need to look at those who have proven their equality with their womanhood. And for that," Shahin says, "We need not look any further than the modest and humble wives and companions of Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!)"^[1]

Shahin Gulam



I seemed by some mysterious Agency to be brought to Islam!

Saida Miller Khalifa was born in London. Her previous name was Sonya Miller. She studied at the Camberwell School, and sculpture and lettering at Sir John Cass College. In 1959, she accepted Islam and was given the Muslim name of Saida. In 1960, she travelled to the U.S. and to Canada, where she met

her husband, Mohamed Khalifa, an Egyptian university Professor. Saida Miller Khalifa subsequently taught art in Cairo at two different schools. She is now studying Arabic calligraphy. Both of the them, i.e. the husband and wife, have made the pilgrimage to Makkah several times.

How she came to the threshold of Islam, it is an interesting story. But it is quite clear that she was guided by Allah and as a result, she entered the fold of Islam:

She is the author of a book namely, *'The Fifth pillar': the story of a pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah!*. The foreword of the book is written by Dr. Abdel Halim Mahmoud, Grand Shaikh, Professor of Al-Azhar University.

"To Saida Miller Khalifa, a young English-woman who twelve years earlier embraced Islam, performing the pilgrimage, the Fifth Pillar of the Faith, proves a glorious experience. Traveling with her, then, to Makkah, the holy city forbidden to unbelievers, the reader sees through the eyes of a Westerner a glimpse of another world with its mysterious sacred rites.

In addition, *The Fifth Pillar* is beautifully illustrated with photographs of Makkah, Medinah and the white-robed Hujjaj, a rare opportunity for a Westerner to view the ancient holy places.

Saida Miller Khalifa Writes, "Pilgrimage... is a religious duty incumbent on every able Muslim. In the course of the sacred journey, the pilgrim will be subjected to certain physical tests of his forbearance... but the pilgrim who humbly carries out the Hajj will discover fresh springs to purify his faith. With a newfound serenity, he will see the world in a different perspective from before, and he will be conscious of a power strengthening him against the rigors of material life.

Down through the centuries, the miraculous annual migration of the white-robed birds of passage continues, guided by the steadily shining light of Islam, which will, *In Sha Allah*,

^[1] Courtesy: *Al-Wardah* and *Islamic Voice* October 1993, p. 17 and *Yaqeen International*, 7 March 1990).

continue till the end of time".

The book was published by Exposition press Inc., New York, U.S.A., in 1977.

Saida Miller Khalifa has not only given rituals of the pilgrimage but also quoted Quranic Verses and Traditions of the Holy Prophet of Islam. In addition, she has given her own views and impressions about the Hajj and other Islamic rituals. In this way, the book becomes informative, thrilling, and beneficial even for those who are beyond the pale of Islam. She writes:

"It was 1970 and my third year in Egypt. Ever since my arrival, I had been wondering how and when I would be able to go on Pilgrimage with my husband."

In 1969, we had entered our names for the ballot but were unsuccessful, so the following year Yusry wrote to a Saudi whose name had been recommended to him. This invisible benefactor obliged us by sending an invitation.

Yusry had been granted leave by his university, and the school at which I was then working had also agreed to my absence for a month.

The Judge spoke to Yusry who translated. What are the Five Pillars of Islam?

I answered, "Belief in the One God and that Muhammad is His Prophet, the five daily prayers, payment of alms, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and making the Pilgrimage".

Then I was asked to recite any Verses I knew from the Holy Qur'an.

We have been convinced that the bearer of this passport, Saida Sonya, has adopted the Faith correctly and she is performing the Islamic rites and we have no objection that she carries out the pilgrimage and visits the Prophet's Mosque accompanying her husband and under the care of the Ministry of Hajj.

Western critics of the Muslim way of life are always quick to point out the high rate of divorce, the threat of which they claim hangs like a sword over the heads of married women. While it is doubtless true a divorced Muslim wife would find it more difficult to remarry because of the social stigma in many communities one wonders if the rate of divorce is as high proportionately as in, say, North America.

In the Prophet's day, women used to attend prayers regularly in the mosque, but, when he considered they might be attracting masculine attention by praying publicly (though not of course intending to do so), the Prophet advised women to pray in the privacy of their own homes. Consequently, the majority of women pray at home today, although, during the Hajj, they are recommended to join in all the congregational prayers.

The *Adhan* in Makkah has a melody different from the one in Cairo. This is chiefly because the *Mueddhin's* voice is pitched much higher in the holy cities, no doubt in the manner of the powerfully voiced Bilal.

For me, the call to prayer in the Haram especially always has a wild beauty, seeming like the lark's song' to flutter ever-higher, until it comes finally to rest on a touching cadence.

The perfumes of Makkah and Medinah are popular with men who like to follow the Prophet's example of perfuming themselves before prayers. Another custom of the Prophet was the use of a small tooth stick of aromatic wood. Bunches of toothsticks are sold today by pavement vendors. When cut, the wood divides into bristles at one end, useful not only for the teeth but to massage the gums.

Water! Not only is the never-failing spring of Zamzam a blessing for which the faithful fervently thank God, but the amazing abundance of water for every need in that arid valley where Makkah lies is truly a blessing beyond words.

There is great deal of truth in what he says, yet I personally would differ with his opinion to the extent that pilgrimage does mean different things to different pilgrims. My husband says that he goes on the *Hajj* to get his spiritual batteries recharged, and to increase the spiritual sensitivity of his heart. For myself, the *Hajj* meant a voyage of discovery ending in the opening of a door to a far deeper spiritual experience, even though my travelling to Makkah was indeed a declaration of faith.

I would remember forever the instant when my lips touched the Black Stone in the hollow worn by the imprint of billions of reverent kisses down through the centuries. Silken and scented with Oriental perfumes, its touch is unlike anything of this world. The consciousness that the Prophet had himself kissed the Black Stone out of reverence for its association with Abraham (may peace be upon him!) and the angel Gabriel filled me with a feeling of awe and wonder at this meeting point of faith, where far distant past and present fuse in a timeless moment.

Every Muslim grieves at leaving the Kaabah and saying farewell to the Haram. Having longed so passionately to be there, the heart can hardly bear to leave.

A few days later, Yusray and I were able to approach the Prophet's tomb. It was very early in the morning soon after the doors opened for the dawn prayer. The tomb itself has a mystery about it. It is surrounded by a delicately wrought metal screen innumerable baskets, bundles, and they looked like 'Prairie Schooners' of America's Old West.

Reflecting on our brief story of a mere week in Medinah, certain vivid impressions come to mind. The strongest of these is inevitably the beauty of the Prophet's Mosque, its singular charm, the joy of being present there and taking part in the prayers, at one with the vast and ardent congregation. The extraordinary power of the Quranic recitations that surged and billowed from wall to wall, charming the ears of the rapt

listeners who remained after the evening prayers to sit in that exalted, peaceful setting.

Twelve years before going on the *Hajj*, I had been a person without a specific faith, although I had always believed in God. Then gradually through reading, especially Pickthall's *Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, and discussion with members of a devoted group of Muslims in London, I seemed by some mysterious agency to be brought to Islam, which word means submission to the will of God. For me, there is in Islam not only a source of strength and solace, truth and peace of mind, but also a profound mystery. But then surely, do not all the great faiths have an element of mystery about them, in that they are concerned with much that is inexplicable and abstract? Mysterious, the invisible communication with the Divine Being; mysterious, the hidden bonds of kinship with fellow-believers; mysterious, the pull of the unseen, impelling countless millions to live by spiritual values.

That same unseen agency which led me to Islam seems also to have influenced my leaving England to travel to Canada, where I was convinced I would find more suitable work. It was with some trepidation, thought, that I left my dearly beloved mother and father — to whom I owed everything — and said good-bye to my two brothers, Lorimer and Jonathan, whom I held equally dear. Was it merely by chance, I was destined to meet and marry in Canada a man so deeply religious? My husband, who is Egyptian, like countless men of his faith was named after its Prophet, Muhammad; and had himself been on the great pilgrimage twice and the lesser one three times. His work as a university professor of engineering only serves to intensify his faith. Much of his spare time is taken up with religious study and with reading from the Qur'an. Muhammad, called by his family name of 'Yusray' throughout this book, with his knowledge of the faith, has always been my best guide and

counselor and, indeed, I could never have undertaken the *Hajj* without him.

In writing my personal impressions of the *Hajj*, it has not been my aim, nor would I be qualified, to include all aspects of each rite nor to delve too deeply into their historic origins. The reader wishing to learn more about this subject, including the prayers accompanying the rites will find Ahmad Kamal's book *The Sacred Journey* most informative. My aim has been simply to tell the story of my first *Hajj* and in doing so to try to convey something of the strangeness and wonder, the tumult and peace, and above all the deep spiritual enjoyment experienced in the course of its completion. It seemed to me the impact of so profound an experience on an English woman like myself might be of interest to others with a Western background. At the same time, the way of life lived in this corner of the world, when circumstances require large numbers of people to coexist peacefully in a limited space, may be the subject of unusual interest. Since St. John Philby wrote about his journey some forty years ago, Saudi Arabia has seen enormous changes for the better, affecting travel also, and these changes naturally give a different feeling to the story. As far as I know, all previous accounts in English have been written by men, so a feminine viewpoint may be timely. Perhaps I should add that I have been fortunate enough to have carried out the *Hajj* five times and the *Umrah* many more times since 1970. Of course my reactions to certain situations as they arose tended to be rather different from those of born Muslims coming from backgrounds with customs and traditions other than my own.

But now, if the reader has come this far with me, perhaps he will adventure further and read on until he reaches the focus of the pilgrim's dreams, Makkah the Noble, and Madinah the Illuminated.

Saida Miller Khalifa

Hajj is the supreme and profound experience, which cements the Brotherhood of Islam!

These are the views expressed by Sister Sakeenah Catherine Quicker Al-Beirut who embraced the religion of Allah, Islam about 15 years ago.

She hails from San Diego, California, U.S.A., she was raised in a strict Catholic household and never visited the Muslim world. She was taught by her religious teachers that Islamic rituals were 'barbaric'. After her graduation, she wanted to serve as a 'Missionary'. But Allah, the Lord of Power, the Al-Mighty, guided her to the 'Straight Path'. Luckily, she happened to read Verse 16 of *Surat Qaf* of the Holy Qur'an which reads:

"We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein".

Although, she did not know that these Verses were from the Holy Qur'an, she could not control her tears. She felt that 'something unusual' had happened to her. As much as she tried to erase the memory of the Verses from her brain, she felt as if they were engraved upon her memory and it was impossible for her to erase them. With the result, after about one year's experience, she entered the 'fold of Islam' and declared *Shahadah*. It is worth mentioning that following her example, her parents also accepted Islam. She feels that she is lucky and fortunate that she has performed *Hajj*, which, she believes is a 'miracle'. We feel pleasure in presenting and reproducing her 'Journey to Islam' story with the courtesy of *Riyadh Daily* (16th March, 2001) for the general interest with the earnest hope that those who are 'Seekers of Truth' will follow suit.

Hajj, the supreme and profound experience, cements the

realization of what the 'brotherhood' of Islam truly signifies, according to an American lady from San Diego, California, who accepted Islam about 15 years ago.

"Hajj is indeed the journey of a lifetime, indeed a journey I never conceived I would embark on in my lifetime because I came into this world in a Catholic Christian household." Sakeenah Catherine Quicker Al-Beirut told *Riyadh Daily* in a telephone interview Tuesday.

"It is a sea of humanity with human beings forming veritable currents, all dressed in a similar modest garb-ihram, with no distinction between a prince and a pauper, and all with one goal, one driving force in mind: the worship of the Creator who gave them life and who will bring them back to Him after death to account for their deeds" Sakeenah said.

"I am astounded beyond words at the miracle that brought me to this place, at this time witnessing fellow pilgrims fulfill their rites of the Hajj," she added.

She said, she was moved to tears looking at the multitudes of skin colors, which brought home the realization that "yes, indeed, Islam is truly the religion of all humanity." "There are no national or ethnic borders that can prevent its call for truth, and indeed Allah looks at the heart as the place of righteousness and 'Taqwah' that racism is a lie foisted and perpetuated upon humankind by the evil deceiver's Satan" She said.

"My realization of what the 'brotherhood' of truly signifies, has been cemented in my consciousness, along with profound gratitude for having guided me away from a religion I was raised in Hajj is a journey of a lifetime for this humble servant who never even imagined she would be a part of this sea of pilgrims at this holy time of year, much less than she would embrace Islam as her way of life until death," Sakeenah explained.

She said that her conversion to Islam was another example of the stark fact that if Allah wishes to guide, nothing can stop or interfere with His Will. She was raised in a strict Catholic household, and was schooled in private Catholic schools up until she graduated from university.

"My early exposure to Islam was limited to the sarcastic and ignorant comments from religious teachers about 'Mohammedans' and their 'barbaric' desert rituals," she said, and added, "as I moved into high school, the emphasis was on more false information gleaned from authors who had never visited the Muslim world, only had read about it, and this accounted for 'first hand' knowledge at that time I swallowed everything I was taught, because I wanted to excel in my classes and have my teachers be proud of me. It reached a point with me that my religious faith in Christianity became so strong that I thought I might have a vocation as a missionary after university.

Sakeenah, who is a voracious reader, said that little did she know then that this habit would open her heart and eyes, and propel her onto the path of Islam.

She said that the day her 'heart was cracked open' began with her, calmly reading a book of phrases of wisdom from various people, religions, and movements about 16 years ago when she was in her 20s.

She came upon the following Verses:

"The Guardian-Lord hath not forsaken thee, nor is He displeased. And verily, the Hereafter will be better for thee than the present. And soon will thy Guardian-Lord give thee (that wherewith) thou shalt be well-pleased. Did He not find thee an orphan and give thee shelter (and care?) and He found thee wandering, and He gave thee guidance." (*Surat Dhuha*, 93:3-7). And "We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein." (*Surat Qaf*, 50:16)

At that time she did not know that these Verses were from the Holy Qur'an. "I was moved to tears that would not cease. And each time, I reread the Verses, my heart felt as if knives were tearing it apart, as if I was reading the heaviest words I had ever seen in print," she recalled. "My emotional reaction was very strange, for never had the printed word evoked such an outpouring of emotion in me. The words seemed to be speaking to me and if I returned to the Verses, I would begin to weep again for an unknown reason, with the same heavy cracking feeling in my heart."

Still unaware of the origin of the Verses, she looked down at the footnotes "expecting to see a reference to an unknown Biblical passage, or something from whatever....," but saw the word 'Qur'an' as the origin of the 'words of wisdom'.

"To this day, the memory is still very fresh," Sakeenah said, and added that when she ventured to reread the passages, the emotional outburst began afresh, and the feeling that her heart would burst returned.

"When I attempted to elicit a similar response from other passages in the book, it was fruitless. They fell on my ears and eyes like neutral water, with not effect," Sakeenah said.

Slowly she began reading more and more about Islam, striving quietly to find books that did not reek of prejudice but simply related the facts about the faith. All the while, she was a practicing Christian, going to Mass, yet thinking that this was purely an intellectual exercise in learning more about world religions.

"Yet deep inside, I realized something momentous had happened to me that afternoon while perusing that book. As much as I tried to erase the memory of the Verses from my brain, it was as if they were engraved upon my memory, impossible to erase." About a year after the experience she accepted Islam.

Sakeenah said that it was through those Verses that Allah opened the door to Islam and she joined other Muslims "in this glorious faith, this incredible way of life."

After much effort, after much unlearning of old false ideas, after much erasing of the cassettes in my mind, I realized that Islam is the religion of the Creator of the Universe," she emphasized.

"My parents, Joseph and Charlotte, embraced Islam some nine years ago. This is a gift that I feel, I cannot thank Allah enough for. I hope to bring them for *Hajj* next year," said Sakeenah, who has been living in Jeddah for the last five years with her architect husband, who is also a Muslim. She and her husband do 'Dawa' work. "I am very happy in Saudi Arabia, the people are wonderful and the atmosphere is nice," she said.

Sakeenah Catherine Quicker Al-Beirut



Discovering faith; belief in Monotheism draws Hindu lady to Islam

'Islam is the only practical religion and a complete way of life. God has decreed:

"It is I and My Messengers who must prevail for God is One full of Strength, able to enforce His Will". (*Surat Al-Mujadilah*, 58:21) *Alhamdulillah!* The religion of Allah, the religion of His Messengers is prevailing all the world over. Islam is growing fast day by day and the Will of Allah is being enforced. Not to speak of Europe and America, Islam is rapidly growing in Asia also. We have Dr. K.V. Vijayalaxmi with us, who hails from Andhra Pradesh, India. She was born to an orthodox Hindu family, but she was never satisfied with the beliefs, rituals and customs of Hinduism. After getting MBBS degree, she married a Muslim Doctor, Kunju Muhammad. But to her bad luck, it lasted only for a few months. So she was deprived of the first attempt to know about Islam and its marvellous teachings. She was greatly disgusted and disturbed by the failure of her marriage. Out of love and sympathy, she was taken to Hindu priests and temples for relieving her pain and agony by her parents, but it proved fruitless. In such circumstances, she did her Doctor of Medicine and joined a Christian Missionary Hospital. In Christian surroundings, she came in touch with Christianity. She studied its literature but was not impressed by its rituals and dogmas, i.e. Trinity, various versions of the Bible owned and claimed by different sects of Christians. In this state of affairs, she got an offer to serve Saleh Al-Saleh Medical Center in 1990 at Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia. At this Medical Center, she came close to Islam. One of her Pakistani friends gave her the English translation of the Holy Qur'an. As she studied the Holy Qur'an, her interest increased. In the

meantime, she joined Dr. H. G. Polyclinic in Jeddah. One of her friends Sarah, a revert to Islam, gave her some Islamic literature. She studied it, and held discussions, with her friends. At last, she discovered Islam and was convinced by its Truth.

To reach the Truth of Islam, she had to study it deeply and thoroughly. She also had comparative study of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam and came to the conclusion that Islam was the only practical religion and a complete way of life.

She entered the fold of Islam and on April 12, 1995, she took Salma as her Islamic name. She was fortunate to perform *Umrah* on the same day.

Dr Salma has devoted her heart and soul for the preaching and propagation of Islam. May Allah bless her and bestow upon her health, strength and patience to continue this sacred service, Ameen!

Brother Syed Faisal Ali interviewed Dr. Salma which was published in the *Saudi Gazette* on Friday, May 24, 1996 at page 7. We feel much pleasure in reproducing her interview for our brothers and sisters — *Editor*.

Although, Dr K.V. Vijayalaxmi was born in an orthodox Hindu religious family of Nadidwalla village of the West Godawari district in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, she was never impressed with its beliefs, superstitious rituals and customs. After obtaining her MBBS degree, she married a Muslim doctor, Kunju Muhammad. But, unfortunately, the marriage lasted only for a few months.

Thus, she failed in her first effort to know about Islamic beliefs and teachings. She was betrayed by her husband and was in sheer frustration and dismay. Her parents took her to various Hindu priests and temples for relieving her pain and agony, but all went in vain. Hinduism never appealed to her which she

believes is based on superfluous beliefs without any uniformity.

In the meantime, she did M.D. and joined a Christian missionary hospital in Ganapavaram, Andhra Pradesh. Here she came in touch with Christianity. She read the literature but was not convinced, specially with the concept of Trinity. She asked the priest to explain how God had a son with Mary but was unable to digest his answers. She could not understand the reason of various testaments of the Bible and felt it has lost the spirituality of thoughts somewhere. The differences amongst these versions, owned and claimed by different sects of Christians to be the real book of God, failed to turn her towards Christianity.

In great distress and agony, she received an offer to join Saleh Al-Saleh Medical Center at Al-Khobar in 1990. Here again, she came in touch with Islam. One of her Pakistani friends gave her the English translation of the Qur'an. She studied it in a short time, which increased her interest to know more about Islam.

Her thirst was at its peak when she joined Dr Hassan Ghazzawi Polyclinic at Jeddah. One of her friends Sarah, who teaches in the Indian Embassy School and is a revert to Islam, gave her some more literature to quench her thirst. After reading a lot of Islamic literature and holding discussions with her friends she was convinced that it is the true religion. And now wanted to embrace Islam. The more she read about Islam, the more its truthfulness became apparent to her.

After thoughtful consideration, comparative study of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, she concluded that Islam is the only practical religion and a complete way of life. She expressed her desire to her colleague Dr Khursheed about her declaration of being a Muslim. Dr. Khursheed took her to the Shariah Court, where she recited the *Kalima* on April 12, 1995; hence Dr K.V. Vijayalaxmi became Dr Salma and went to perform her first *Umrah* the very same day.

Dr Salma says that she was aware of the risk, she took and its social impact on her family in India, but it never deterred her in her endeavour. Now she proudly says that she is a Muslim who loves calling people for prayers. She feels propagation of Islamic thought and *Da'wah*, a necessity of the time to put before the people the truthfulness of Islam.

The uniformity of thought and belief is the essence of Islam. Monotheism, the concept of equality, *Salah* and *Zakah* impressed her a lot. Timely prayers keeps a Muslim close to Allah and is a link for direct communication between the Creator and His creations, she says.

Whatever charity or social service is done by the people of other religions is for the atonement of their sins. But in Islam it is compulsory to help the needy. It imbues a sense of responsibility and social service for alleviating the suffering in the world, she feels.

Now Dr. Salma, with all her devotion and dedication, is practising Islamic way of life as well as propagating Islam among others. She proudly said that due to her influence and guidance one of her colleagues Ismail embraced Islam. She is trying her best to invite more and more people to Islam.

With regret, she said that she could not perform *Hajj* this year because she wanted to know everything in detail about its rituals and obligations before doing it. But she hopes to perform it next year.

She thanks Dr. Hassan Ghazzawi and Dr Khursheed who always supported her by providing timely suggestions and guidance.

Dr Salma K.V Vijayalaxmi



Truth of Islam forced me to embrace Islam!

In *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2:256) of the Holy Qur'an Allah, the Al-Mighty and Creator of all creation, commands:

"Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah, has grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah hears and knows all things."

As far as the 'Journey to Islam story' of Mrs. Dr. Salma Siddiqui is concerned, we know that it was the 'Truth' and 'Brotherhood' of Islam that compelled her to enter the fold of Islam. After the 'Truthfulness' of Islam had dawned on her, she rejected evil and believed in Allah without any hesitation or compulsion whatsoever. We are fully aware of the fact that she has, undoubtedly grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks because she knows:

Allah is the Protector of those who have faith: From the depths of darkness, He will lead them forth into light... But as for those who reject faith their patrons are the evil ones: from light they will lead them forth into the depths of darkness. They will be companions of the Fire, to dwell therein for ever (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2:257)

Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds. There is no shadow of doubt that she is a 'True Muslim', as Allah has guided her and opened her breast to Islam, the Straight Path. As Allah, the Creator of the Universe, Himself says:

"Those whom Allah (in His Plan) wills to guide, He opens their breast to Islam; Those whom He wills to leave straying, He makes their breast closed and constricted, as if they had to climb up to the skies, thus does Allah (heap) the penalty on those who refuse to believe."

As regards the 'Reversion to Islam story, of Mrs. Dr. Salma Siddiqui, we would like to give a few details, for those who are 'Seekers of Truth' and have not yet entered the fold of Islam in particular and others in general for information and guidance. May be, following the golden example of our respectable and esteemed sister others also will come to the 'Right Path' which is Islam.

Mrs. Dr. Salma Siddiqui belongs to a respectable and learned Hindu family of Punjab. Her father Mr. D.P. Duggal graduated from the Forman Christian College, Lahore. After sometime, he settled down in London in connection with his business of import and export. He was the father of four sons and three daughters. Mr. B.K. Duggal, being the eldest, worked as Manager of British Railways. He is doing business after his retirement now a days. Mr. B.P. Duggal did his Ph.D. in Mathematics. It is notable that he is the sixth Mathematician in the world. Mr. A.P. Duggal is also a Graduate of the Punjab University and is working as Assistant Commissioner in Delhi. The fourth one is Mr. Rocky Duggal. Regarding the daughters of Mr. D.P. Duggal, one has settled down in Canada, while the second is in India. The third one is our esteemed sister, Mrs. Salma Siddiqui, wife of Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui.

Mrs. Salma Siddiqui (formerly Vanita Duggal) was born on 30th October, 1954. She is commonly called 'Guddi, being her nickname. All the family members call her 'Guddi' out of love and affection even today. She is a double Graduate. She passed her B.A. and B. Ed. from the Punjab University. It is worth mentioning that during her studies, she took keen interest in sports, and was one of the best players. She got a number of prizes. During her stay in India, she taught for sometime. It was the beginning of 1975 when Mrs. Salma Siddiqui happened to come to Khartum (Sudan) to visit her brother, Dr. B.P. Duggal who was teaching in the Islamic University Khartum, Sudan, as professor of Mathematics. It is notable that Dr. B.P. Duggal and

Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui (who was Associate Professor of Philosophy in the same University) were very close friends and living in the same area. As a staunch believer and an active preacher and Daa'e of Islam, Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui was respected by all and Dr. B.P. Duggal not only held him in high esteem but also he had a very soft corner in his heart. Miss Vanita Duggal (now Mrs. Salma Siddiqui) had the chance to attend a number of functions and listen to Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui's speeches and lectures on Islam. It will not be out of place to mention that Muslims worldwide represent Islam as a complete code of life which provides solutions to all the problems of daily life. Every Muslim knows that it is the only religion that gives women a very respectable and honourable status. It is my experience that most of the women who entered the fold of Islam certify that Islam is the only religion which elevates their status. Miss Vanita Duggal was greatly impressed rather enchanted by the truth, simplicity, equality, fraternity, brotherhood and completeness of Islam, particularly the respectable status which it gives to women. On one occasion, sister Mrs. Salma Siddiqui told us that during her stay in Khartum she came to know that Dr. Muhammd Murtaza Siddiqui was loved and respected by all. Everybody held him in high esteem. I myself, like others, was also impressed by his dynamic and towering personality. He was a 'man of character' He was a practicing Muslim. He did what he preached. He was not a hypocrite and hypocrisy was a word unknown to him. Usually we come across people whose inner life is quite different from their outer life. They preach, but they do not practice themselves. Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui was a different man. He was a combination of the qualities of head and heart, and he had inherited all these qualities. These were the basic reasons which impressed me and changed my world. Consequently, I decided to marry him. Before we proceed, we would like to mention an anecdote

relating to the character of Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui. Sister Mrs. Salma Siddiqui told us that once it so happened that my brother Dr. B.P. Duggal and his British wife had to travel out of Sudan in connection with a conference. They wanted to leave me and their daughter (my niece) in Khartum. I well remember that my sister-in-law preferred to leave us both with Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui instead of leaving us with any other family members. She was so confident and satisfied with Dr. Siddiqui's character that she did not hesitate in making her decision. She said: Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui has excellent moral character. It is better to leave the children with him."

As stated earlier, after being immensely impressed by the dynamic personality and excellent character of Dr. Murtaza Siddiqui, I told my brother Dr. B.P. Duggal that I have decided to marry Dr. Murtaza Siddiqui. I also explained the reasons of my choice which led me to make this decision. He told me that he had no objection but preferred to consult my parents. As the whole family agreed, so there was no hinderance whatsoever. Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui put the same proposal before my brother. So it was presumed that I should embrace Islam before being married to Dr. Murtaza Siddiqui. Sister Mrs. Salma Siddiqui once told us that Dr. Murtaza Siddiqui was her 'ideal' and it is worth-mentioning that on one occasion Dr. Murtaza Siddiqui told us that sister Mrs. Salma was his 'ideal' and the 'wish' of his mother.

Sister Mrs. Salma was the 'ideal' which Dr. Murtaza Siddiqui's mother had dreamt of.

In short, sister Mrs. Salma Siddiqui, previously Miss Vanita Duggal, accepted Islam at the hands of *Imam Sahib* of 'Masjid Farooq' Khartum (Sudan) in February 1975. It is notable that King Farooq (b. 1920, d. 1965) was the ruler of Egypt and Sudan and he built this mosque during his reign which was named

after his name. It is an excellent model of Islamic architecture. The wedding ceremony of Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui and sister Salma Siddiqui (Salma being her Islamic name in place of Vanita) was solemnized according to Islamic rituals on 24th June, 1975. Dr Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui was 36 years old while sister Salma 22 years. Both of them signed a matrimonial deed as bride and bridegroom. Prof. Kashmeera Singh son of Harbans Singh, appeared as witness from the side of the bride, whereas Prof. Maqbool Ahmad Siddiqui, son of Hafiz Muhammad Ahmad Siddiqui and Abid bin Ahmad, son of Ghulam Ahmad Abid appeared as witnesses from bridegroom's side. Maulana Abdus Subhan, son of S. Khan of Delhi performed matrimonial rites.

After the marriage ceremony, Mrs. Salma Siddiqui had to accompany Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui to Sudan where he was working as Associate Professor of Philosophy in Khartum University. One of the requirements to travel to Sudan was a marriage certificate issued by the Indian court. We produce a copy of the same document which throws ample light with regard to acceptance of Islam by sister Mrs. Salma Siddiqui

Marriage Certificate:

This is to certify that Mr. Mohammad Murtaza Siddiqui son of late H.M. Mahmood Siddiqui Saheb, at the time of marriage aged 36 years, religion Islam, occupation University service, resident of Maqam-e-Mahmood, Red Hills, Hyderabad, was married to Miss Salma Siddiqui, daughter of late Mr.D.P.Duggal, at the time of marriage aged 22 years, religion Islam, occupation house-hold, resident of Punjab, on 24.6.1975.

This certificate is based on the marriage certificate issued to the party separately by Moulana Abdus Subhan Saheb, Cannought Circus, New delhi. Bearing No.3 D- 24-6-1975.

This certificate is valid under Indian law. Issued under my seal

and signatures this the 30th day of July, 1975.

Notary

Appointed by A.P. Govt., for Hyderabad City.

The other requisite for travel to Sudan was an 'Affidavit' by Mrs. Dr. Salma Siddiqui issued by the Indian court. This 'Affidavit' throws light on two major aspects:

1. Acceptance of Islam
2. Wedding to Dr. Muhammad Murtaza Siddiqui.

As this 'Affidavit' is closely related to the subject under discussion, we have the honour to present a copy of the said document.

Affidavit:

I, Salma Siddiqui (Vanita, daughter of D. P. Duggal) wife of Dr. M. M. Siddiqui, age 22 years, occupation house-hold, resident of H. No. 536 Red Hills, Hyderabad, A. P. solemnly affirm and state on oath as follows:

1. That previously, I was a Hindu and my name was Vanita and my father's name is D.P. Duggal and I was a resident of Punjab (India).
2. That I with my free will and consent converted to Islam and married myself to Dr. M. M. Siddiqui on 24th June, 1975 at Delhi.
3. That now I am a Muslim and wife of Dr. M. M. Siddiqui and at the time of my marriage I was a major so I have married with my free will and consent. There was no permission or consent necessary of my parents.
4. That my husband Dr. M. M. Siddiqui is employed in Sudan so as he is going there, I am accompanying him to Sudan.
5. That in future no one has any right to interfere with my

private matters as I am a major and can do any legal act according to my will and consent.

Hence this affidavit.

Dated 31. 7. 1975.

Deponent

Sworn and signed

It is worthy to note that during her stay in Khartum, Sudan, Mrs. Dr. M. M. Siddiqui contributed a lot in educating the children. Being double Graduate and holding Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degrees, she taught in one of the schools in Khartum.

It is also notable that one day in 1976 while sitting in solitude and loneliness she thought that if Allah, the Creator of the Universe, gave her two children, she would name them Sameer and Robina. She noted down these names in her diary. It is to be noted that it was the 'Will of Allah' that instead of the birth of a son, a daughter, namely Robina was born to her in 1978, surprisingly on the same date, i.e. 24th June when her marriage ceremony (i.e. 24th June, 1975) took place after a period of two years and the baby was named Robina. It is also worth mentioning that after about two and a half years a son was born on the 18th November, 1980 who was named Sameer. Miss Robina Siddiqui plans to do M. B. A., (Master in Business Administration) fulfilling the wish of her worthy father, while Sameer Siddiqui is studying at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals and wishes to specialise in Software Engineering. It was the wish of Dr. M. M. Siddiqui that both of them might make name and revive the fame of their forefathers.

Now that the calamity has fallen on the whole family in the shape of unexpected and sudden death of our lovable and esteemed brother and close associate Dr. M.M. Siddiqui and

while writing this our pen trembles and our hearts beat, we still mourn his death as does the whole family. We earnestly hope that all the relatives, friends, associates and well-wishers of the deceased, will share their grief and sufferings in this hour of trial. We pray to Allah, the Al-Mighty, to bestow His bounties, blessing favours upon them and may the soul of the deceased rest in peace.

After coming to know about the unexpected death of Dr. M. M. Siddiqui, Mr. A. P. Duggal, brother-in-law of the departed soul came to Riyadh to console and pacify the grieved family. During his stay we had chance to meet him daily at the residence of his sister. We not only requested him to participate in the function being held under the auspices of International Islamic Research Institute at the WAMY Auditorium on the 12th of October, 2000, but also requested him to throw some light on the marriage of his sister with Dr. M.M. Siddiqui. Mr. A.P. Duggal, who is working as Assistant Commissioner Excise and Customs in Chandigarh, Punjab, India, told us that it was about two years after the marriage that Dr. Sahib came to India in connection with a lecture which he had to deliver at the India International Center that I managed to meet him. It was on this very occasion that I came to know how people loved him and held him in high esteem. He loved me very much and had a soft corner for me. I thought that I was very lucky and honoured to have a brother-in-law like him, who was admired and respected by highly educated people.

I, hesitatingly, asked him: "Dr. Sahib! Would you please tell me the reason of marrying my sister although she was a non-Muslim?"! Dr. Sahib told me that when he happened to meet her through Dr. B.P. Duggal, an intimate and very close friend of mine, I found her promising, well-mannered and enchanted by the Truth of Allah's Religion, i.e. Islam. She was inclined towards me when she listened to a number of speeches and

lectures delivered by me on Islam and the Prophet of Islam. It was there that I visualized that she was the 'ideal woman' about whom my mother had dreamed and wanted me to marry. Keeping in view the wish of my esteemed mother, I decided that I would marry her.

It is worth mentioning that Dr. M.M. Siddiqui, being the eldest of the family arranged the marriages of his brothers and sisters but did not marry himself. His mother told him that his responsibilities had been fulfilled, so he should marry the woman of his choice. Hearing this Dr. M.M. Siddiqui laughed and told his mother that he did not find suitable woman to marry. But it is notable that after the death of his mother he married Mrs. Salma Siddiqui within a period of six months.

Mr. A. P. Duggal continuing his talk, told us that his sister had also reached the same conclusion. She told her elder brother Dr. B. P. Duggal about her decision. On which he told her that he had no objection but he would have to consult his parents. On the other side, Dr. M.M. Siddiqui put the proposal of marriage before Dr. B. P. Duggal to which he consented. Mr. A.P. Duggal told us that Dr. M.M. Siddiqui accepted the offer with one obvious condition that my sister should embrace Islam first, then the marriage would take place. As a result, she entered the fold of Islam at the hands of *Imam Sahib* of Masjid-e-Farooq, Khartum, Sudan in February 1975.

It will not be out of place to mention that Dr. Murtaza Siddiqui taught the Holy Qur'an part by part to sister Mrs. Salma Siddiqui. He also taught her the basic teachings of Islam and Traditions of the Noble Prophet of Islam which deal with the daily life. In the beginning, he taught the children the Holy Qur'an and later on he arranged a *Qari* for them who was responsible to teach them the Holy Qur'an daily. It is to be noted that all of them are 'true Muslims' who follow the teachings of Islam and the Traditions of the Prophet of Islam. Sister Mrs. Salma Siddiqui says that she will

try her level best to educate the children in such a way as was the 'wish' of their beloved father. As far as the children are concerned they also are bent upon to follow the footsteps of their esteemed father. We being Muslims believe that man is mortal and he cannot avoid or escape death. On the contrary, we should be prepared for death. In (*Surat Al-Imran*, 3: 185), Allah, the Creator of all creation, says:

"Every soul shall have a taste of death! And in (*Surat Saba*, 34:30), Allah, the Al-Mighty, commands,

"Say: the appointment to you is for a day, which you cannot put back for an hour nor put forward."

At the end, we may remind our esteemed sister Mrs. Dr. M.M. Siddiqui that we are born Muslims in the sense that we were born to Muslim parents. We cannot reach that status which she has achieved by leaving her parents and entering the fold of Islam. When we are reminded of the following golden Tradition of our Beloved Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings be upon him!), we envy her high rank:

Abu Umama reported Allah's Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) as saying:

"Blessed is he who has seen me, but seven times blessed is he who has not seen me but has believed in me."

(Transmitted by *Ahmad*)

May Allah bless her and bestow His blessings, bounties and favours upon the family of the deceased *Ameen!*^[1]

Dr. Salama Siddiqui

(written by Muhammad Haneef Shahid)

^[1] This article is based on the interview of the writer with Dr. M. M. Siddiqui, Mrs. Salma Siddiqui and her other family members and the documents supplied by them. It will not be out of place to mention that the writer had intimate and close relations with Dr. M. M. Siddiqui for the last 23 years.

My Experience as a Muslim female in a Western Society

As a child migrant in Australia, my adult relatives used to warn me about identifying myself as a Muslim. They told me if I did, I would only get into trouble. If I was asked what religion I believed in, I would reply that I did not know. I was too young to realise that some rules had to be changed.

In sixth grade, which was just a few months after my arrival, I met a young Muslim girl who migrated from the United Arab Emirates. She wore the scarf, but hid it tied to the back in half gesture. We became good friends and I warned her the same way my relatives did. She took my advice for a while, but was not happy with the idea.

One day a young Australian female complimented her on the scarf and asked if she wore it because she was a Muslim. My friend glanced at me and I gave her the 'don't do it' look, then she looked back at the questioner and replied: "Yes". Alarmed, I could not help thinking the mess she was bound to get in. But it just so happened that the students got along with her more than with me, and her difference was not minded.

Only when we reached high school, did the real distress hit us. It was a harsh experience but one forgets the pain. Keeping in mind the Verse:

"For Allah is with those who restrain themselves, and those who do good" (*Surat An-Nahal*, 16:128)

can make one more patient. We were called names and sometimes violence would confront us. The vision of old America with open season injustice to Africans, native Americans and other races would linger in our minds. However the main difference between them and us was that

we chose to look the way we did. We were sustained because we knew it to be true. But, with all praises to the Almighty, we managed to get by and lead good, normal lives.

The full way of Islam was still new to me. Who would have guessed that I was going to wear the scarf. I wore it in year eight, on a Tuesday, three weeks before mid-term break. I felt the tension on the first day, and immediately knew then who my true friends were. My science teacher noticed my cringing behaviour on the first day and asked me to stay behind after class. He asked me a few questions like if I was sure with what I was doing and proud of my decision. All my answers were "yes". Finally he told me to put my head up.

Building my self esteem, I realised I wanted to be a content individual. Unlike those who were blind conformers or racists, I did not want to please my peers and suppress my humanity or principles. Many students did not have the confidence to speak out against what they felt was wrong. And so their personal thoughts and inputs were ignored. Unfortunately this affliction also expanded to many Muslim youth who could not see the beautiful face of Islam. Many were ashamed to even admit they were Muslim because of the untrue general stereotyping they were trying to avoid. However due to the hypocrisy of the many Muslims who would hide, sitting on the fence, or even behind evil-doers, rather than contribute positively in goodness to Islam and mankind, it's no wonder the wrong impression of Islam exists.

Many wrong ideas were put forward when we decided to look like Muslims. One comment I remember hearing was: "I never see you at any of the parties", which gave me the impression that it was an obligation and that Allah is with those who are patient.

We had to put up with these hiccups in one of the most sensitive stages of our lives. But it only made us stronger and

eventually we ended up happy, much happier than those who used to tease us. I believe that no one will ever get away with the harm they have done to others without regretting it. If they do not repent there will be a day of recompense, if not in this world, then on the day of resurrection. One guy once told the same friend I met in sixth grade how sorry he was for what he did to her in the past and that he started taking drugs and lived a miserable life. She told him that what he did only made her stronger. I guess this was one of the advantages of experiencing hardships in life.

Some misguided racism was also faced by our families. Members of my family each have had their own experiences. My father was seriously discriminated against when he worked at a Campbelltown Bus company. His colleagues used to ask him to join them for a beer, but he did not conform. He wanted to keep to his religion, perform his regular prayers at work and tried to attend Friday congregational prayers at the local mosque. They used to slander him with graffiti on the walls. They gave him such a hard time till the day he was fired. He never could find a full time job using his mechanical skills ever since. My brother experienced unhappiness in his school. He could not blend in with the majority. Because of his name and complexion he was called names and sometimes attacked. My mother also has a few stories within ordinary places she frequently visits like the shopping centre that people thought we did not know how to have fun. Yet we knew how to fully and innocently enjoy ourselves. Those who got to know us would well agree and it was common to hear them say, "She's cool".

In my first year at University I made an enormous amount of friends. Unfortunately, very few of my friends at that University were Muslim. They respected my endurance for prayers and fasting, moreover they invited me many times to their ways of life. I was asked by groups of friends to parties

and outings. However, I had to put my own religious limits to what I could share with them, like no outings that had alcohol or dancing, etc. we had a lot of good fun.

Family has been an important part of my life. It is the family that plays a major role in the character of a person. Thus the parents and children have to mutually contribute if they want to be successful. Many youth take their families for granted, but as they get older they usually tend to realise, like myself, that the best time one can spend is with their family. Believe it or not, time spent with the family can be more fun and wholesome than parties and outings with peers.

For many of us who grew up in a country like Australia, a lot has been gained in our lives but likewise a lot has been lost. We do not want one of these losses to be our faith in Islam. For the majority of us who did not spend a good portion of our lives in countries where most people are Muslim, our knowledge of Islam is very little. We can't read the Holy Qur'an in its original Arabic text all that well, let alone understand it, without the English Translation. However, with the resources we have, we can make up for the losses, if we use them wisely. We can help ourselves so much, as well as others, if we are determined to do so. Thus, in this country we have to work and network our inner faith and potential.

Many Muslims and non-Muslims have come across the question, "Why do Muslim females wear the scarf"? Most found themselves troubled in answering it. It is probably difficult to answer since it can be quite lengthy or descriptive, if one wants to satisfactorily answer the question. Briefly, the main reason is ultimately because Allah has instructed females to do so. A female Muslim wears the scarf for the very same reason the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus (peace be upon them,) wore one. It is a silent symbol of modesty and religiousness. She is declaring herself off-limits to temptation and uninvited

advances from the playful and promiscuous in society. Even if there were not to be any benefits, it is still a must for every female to cover up because Allah has ordained and advised her to do so.

There are many benefits a female experiences by wearing the scarf. Firstly, she is known to be a Muslim by all of those who pass by her. She preserves her identity and serves as a reminder to Islam, she demands equality as an individual without showing off what she has. People tend to accept her for who she is and not what she is. She experiences great respect from men since she gets treated as a wholesome person by them. It is for her protection that she wears the scarf. It will make her feel more confident, secure and stronger. When a female exposes herself to the public, she attracts men indiscriminately resulting in many sad cases like assault, rape and so forth. A modestly dressed, scarfed lady feels it is up to her to play her part in promoting respect for women and minimising corruption in society.

If many sisters hesitate to even wear the scarf, then how can we together make any progress at all? Wearing the scarf is like waving a flag saying, "I'm proud to be a Muslim". The scarf makes a female stronger than a male, since she is setting the conservative agenda demanding unconditional self respect. At the same time she is proudly acknowledging her female difference and refusing to compete with the male entirely on his terms.

Being young is one thing, but being young and keen in Islam is a great blessing. The beauty about the youth is their tremendous potential. Imagine a baby learning how to walk. It will get up and fall many times. No one expects it to give up at any stage. Until the objective has been fulfilled, i.e. the baby walks well, that baby will keep trying and falling. Religiously we are no different, so why give up with the first difficulties or falls? We should be strong enough to keep on going with full

interest until we get better and better spiritually. Another strong asset of the youth is their curiosity. Although 'curiosity killed the cat', it has many advantages. Teaching the youth their duties can direct them to explore what is good for themselves and the rest of us. So if the young have the potential in Islam, they probably would achieve better results than the older adults.

Sadly however, many of the youth have been misled and exposed to harmfully sinful experiences causing them to become worse as persons rather than better. Some can start off with the wrong foot which could lead them to great misfortunes like AIDS or living in life-threatening violence. They have planted their own evil seed that can only grow into a tree of the same. We have brothers who like to prove themselves tough by being dared into any evil action; however as narrated by Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him!); Allah's Messenger (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) said, "The strong man is not the good wrestler: the strong man is only he who controls himself when he is angry." [*Al-Bukhari and Muslim*]

There are stories like young Muslims in Punchbowl taking drugs while up the street there is a rehabilitation center. There are brothers who carry guns and rob cashiers. In Kings Cross there are Muslims found in clubs and Muslim females selling their bodies. Yet so much good could have come out of them. Bad influences surrounded them and each was too weak to think and wake up to repel such accumulated disadvantages rather than contribute negatively to their well-being by habit alone. Instead of neglect, which is typical in society towards its weak and stray elements, we need dedicated Muslims to visit the younger brothers and sisters to hear them out and talk to them. We need to visit Muslims in jail, listen to their stories, and remind them that they all have the chance to turn back

and return to the right path with the blessings of Allah.

At my University, there are many Muslims intolerant towards Islam. Many hide their identity. Also, many get away with hypocrisy and forget the essence of Islam to contribute positively at all levels. Personally, I refuse to leave my University the way I entered it. Muslims need reminding and one solution was to invite them to Islamic lectures on campus. Few used to say it was too hard and it would take more than two weeks to prepare. However with the help of Allah and a bit of spirit, faith and self confidence it took much less than that and some positive results showed quickly. Surprisingly there were many who were very keen for knowledge and finding answers in Islam. It was a good start with promising success.

So if very few can get together and produce some creative group results, how much could have been done for the Muslim world, if many were prepared to work together? If we do not start doing something positive for the Muslims, then we can only expect misfortune to afflict us. It's just like a passive smoker who suffers from lung cancer without telling the smokers around some courtesy for those who want to maintain their health.

Just about every modern Muslim country is not doing so well since the people and their leaders have failed themselves through hypocrisy, divisions, discrimination, ignorance and all that Islam tells us not to do. Narrated Muhmud bin Labid (may Allah be pleased with him!); Allah's Messenger (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) said, "The thing I fear most for you is the lesser polytheism: the hypocrisy". Most of these countries used to be united, but many, lusting for power and material well-being alone, were claiming leadership at all costs. Splitting these countries and their people into smaller, weaker nations. Too many captains were and still are sinking ships. We face a very similar situation here in Australia. Within

one city, different mosques celebrate *Eid-ul-Fitr* (end of fast celebration) on different days driven by different ideological and shallow political opinions. Divisions arise when groups of Muslims do not compromise their narrow-minded opinions. The Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) said, "The Jews had split up into 71 sects, the Christians had dispersed into 72 sects and this nation (The Muslim nation) will disperse into 73 sects: all of them will dwell in hellfire, except one." When the companions asked the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) about the group that will be delivered, he said, "It is the group that will follow my way and my companions' way," [Bukhari and Muslim]. It is our fault that we have been defeated to an extent that there is not one real Muslim country in the world. Had we been better Muslims, our blood would not have been so commonly spilt.

I have a very close Cambodian Christian friend who has helped me remarkably. She has done things for me no usual friend could do. She always respected my beliefs and has been proud to be with me. She had once told me that if I were to ever take off the scarf she would get upset with me, because it would mean I did not keep to my word. She has never stood in the way of my principles, but as a matter of fact helped me keep them. She has helped me out with the University's Muslim Association and I wish there were more Muslims who have a conduct like hers.

The youth, the future, will have to be more mature if they want to prosper spiritually. They will have to learn from the faults and mistakes of their elders. If we want to prosper, then we have to love Allah and if we really love Him will we live for Him as our Creator and Ultimate Owner in this world and beyond. We also have to love the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) because Allah had

sent him to us and he did so much good for us as a perfect teacher and example in all situations. We need to educate ourselves to do good in the best way we can under all circumstances. This is one form of worship.

I can remember one *Eid* when I cried because the Ramadan Islamic gatherings had ended. I have, just like many of us, been isolated for so long from the Islamic environment. While I was still at high school I once went to a Muslim camp and felt much inner peace for a very long time. We should turn our lives into Islamic camps. The godless society wishes for the rest of the world to be like them. They want us to become personally successful, materially, and utterly neglectful of Divinity and humanity. However, true Muslims avoid such spiritual and humanitarian detachment because they know that they are only passing tourist in this material world which is not even worth the wing of a fly. There are so many innocent people who tolerate injustices wishing to escape to a place of hope. The question is, where can one find such a secure place and live in harmony, except with Allah?

If I have said anything right, then it is through the help of Allah and if I have said anything wrong, then it is entirely due to my own limitations and I beg Allah for forgiveness. May Allah forgive us and help us all to continuously develop and prosper in His goodness.^[1]

Samia Itani (Student, University
of Western Sydney)



^[1] Courtesy: *Salam Australia*; March-April 1997 pages 15-17.

I Found Myself

After being socialized through secularism for more than 15 years, I surprised people around me by my decision to put on a *Hijab* and I shocked them even more when a few years later, I decided to pursue my University degree in IIUM (which is not yet recognized in Singapore) when I was actually eligible for the local University. Already my relatives and friends, being cynical of the drastic change, were teasing me that my real reason to come here was because I wanted to marry a Malaysian. I could swallow all that but I faced a harder obstacle when I met objections from most of them. They tried to discourage me by reminding me and emphasizing the fact that I would have no future in Singapore with the IIU degree. As raw as I was about Islam, I knew for sure that what I was doing was right and I felt that Allah would guide me through just as He had guided me to see the beauty of Islam. You see, at that time I was going through the phase where I needed to find myself. I knew who I was, who my parents were but there was a missing link somewhere. Deep inside me, there was someone trying to get out, to make itself be known. Automatically I was behaving normally, in fact I behaved as if I owned this world but inwardly I was in a constant void. I felt empty and redundant in a world of millions.

Once, I had confided in my closest friend that one person less in the world would make no difference. *Alhamdulillah*, she managed to convince me that my existence could actually make a difference.

God's help comes in various forms and here was a friend though whom Allah extended His Divine Mercy and compassion.

Alhamdulillah, now that "someone within" and myself are at

peace, there are no longer conflicts and there is no longer identity crisis — all because I have found Islam. More than that I have found my Creator, I have come to terms with Him and how He works. If I used to bear a grudge on any misfortune, now, *Alhamdulillah*, I am able to smile on it believing that whatever happens, bad or good, hides infinite wisdom that only Allah knows.

I figure that what happened to me is happening to millions of people out there. The sickness that is plaguing humans is sickness of the soul. As soul is something intangible, people who are facing conflicts believe that their problems come about from their surroundings, not knowing that they themselves are the very cause. Discos, drugs, drinking, etc are not the solutions but merely temporary distractions from the problem. (Trust me, I know as having done the first of the three). The enjoyment that is derived can only numb the pain for the moment but it comes back like a jackhammer stronger than before. I have learned through Sufism that we are made up of two components, the physical and the spiritual. We satisfy our hunger, thirst and other basic physical needs by physical means but to satisfy the deprivation pangs of the soul is to allow the soul to meet its Creator, or at least to acknowledge the existence of the Creator, Allah. The reason why I was in a void constantly was because I never believed in God even though I was born a Muslim. May Allah forgive me for all these years of hypocrisy.

So, for those out there who can relate to what had happened to me before, try getting closer to Allah and you will find that the phrase "Islam is the way of life" is not just a cliché.

It is me again. Remember me? the girl with identity crises? I would like to point out something which I feel could have been misleading. What Flora and I have been writing so far may seem to have an implication that IIUM has done miracles to

change us or at least to give us a better Islamic esteem. It has... well... sort of but up to a certain extent. It has succeeded in providing an environment in which Islam can be practised but then again there is the other side to the situation.

What I am trying to do is to share the lesson which I have learnt. Coming to IIUM, besides seeking knowledge from the Islamic perspective, is something like an escape from an environment which I considered UN-Islamic. I thought I needed to get away from it all. I wanted to start afresh in an Islamic environment, believing that the environment can influence me into becoming a better Muslim. Boy! Was I naive! I have discovered, through the hard way, that strength does not come at the snap of the fingers, rather it comes from within. By introspection, I have discovered that I have been slacking in my pursuit to upgrade myself. I found that I was better in Singapore than I was here. I depended so much on the environment to help me change but it disappointed me.

Being a year older and wiser, I have finally found the answer. When I was in a supposedly UN Islamic environment, I was fighting to keep my faith and practise Islam. My friend and I used to play "hide and seek" with the school authorities just so we could carry out our obligatory prayers. We prayed in any place that was obscured from prying eyes and in shopping complexes. We would seek the not-so-often used stairways to perform maghrib prayers. (Don't get me wrong, there are Mosques in Singapore. It was just that we were too carried away by our shopping or window-shopping to notice the time). My friend and I had made a point not to miss any prayer. It was at that time that I felt myself escalating to the highlights of inner tranquillity, a spiritual experience that is indescribable. Yes! In Singapore where it is not supposed to be Islamic.

However, after a few months here, I felt myself going downhill at full speed. This phenomenon boggled my mind for a long

time and finally a year later, I have found the reason. The reason is that I gave up the fight, taking for granted that Islam can be found here. True, it can but I have forgotten the vow that *Iblis* had made to Allah I slacken in my worship not because of the environment, but due to my own carelessness.

The moral of the experience? You do not need to come here or anywhere else supposedly Islamic to make a change. You can do it right now and right there in the comfort of your own home. What makes the difference is your intention and how willing you are to take up the fight. The excuse that you cannot be a good Muslim in your own country is not valid. The harder the fight is, the better you will become *In Sha Allah*. I am not discouraging those potential IU students out there. It is just that I do not want these Islamically — inspired students to expect miracles when they come here. Miracles do happen but only if you allow yourselves to make the change.

As a reminder for you and for naive me strength comes from within wherever you are.^[1]

Sara BTE Mohammad



It seems that I have always been a Muslim!

It is a common practice that if somebody from the common class does something 'un-usual' or of 'historical nature', he is either ignored or not given much importance, but, on the contrary, if someone from the 'high class' or from the 'Royal family' happens to do something 'usual' or even 'un-usual', it becomes 'part of history' and gets worldwide importance.

As far as Lady Zeinab (Evelyn) Cobbold is concerned she was a Lady of worldwide fame. She was the sister of the 8th Earl of Dunmore, V.C. (cr. 1686) Alexander Edward Murray, Viscount Fincastle, Lord Murrey, 1686, Baron Dunmore (U.K.) 1831, V.C. 1898; D.S.O. 1917; M.V.O. 1906, Major 16th Lancers; born on 22nd April, 1871, and son of 7th Earl and Lady Gertrude Coke. Served as A.D.C. to Viceroy of India; 1895-1897. *A Frontier Campaign* is his publication which was published in 1898. He died on 29th January, 1962.^[1]

Lady Evelyn Cobbold was married in 1891 to John Dupius Cobbold, D.L., who died in 1929.^[2]

It is sad that very little has been written about her. Keeping in view her services for the cause of Islam, it is imperative that a detailed and complete (as far as possible) account should be written which should highlight her services.

The most important and worth-mentioning feature of her life in that she is the first British Muslim lady who

^[1] Courtesy: *Australian Muslim News*, 22nd May - 5 June, 1995 page 5.

^[1] *Who was who*, 1961-1970, London, Adam, Charles Black, 1970, page 328.

^[2] *Ibid.* page 220.

performed *Hajj* in April 1933 as 'State Guest'.

In this respect, the *Islamic Review* writes: "Her Ladyship, the Lady Evelyn Cobbold Zainab performed the pilgrimage to Makkah in April 1933, and was indeed the first English woman to have had that honour"^[1]

"We offer our congratulations to Lady Evelyn Cobbold on her meritorious task of having performed the *Hajj* — a duty incumbent on every Muslim and *Muslima*."^[2]

How and why Lady Evelyn Cobbold embraced Islam, in the '*Introduction to Pilgrimage to Mecca*, she herself writes:

"If this be Islam," asks Goethe, "do we not all live in Islam?" "Yes," answers Carlyle, "all of us that have any moral life, we all live so."

The word 'Islam' means surrender to God. It also means peace. A Muslim is only who is "in harmony with the Decrees of the Author of This World," one who has made his peace with God and His creatures.

Islam is based on two fundamental truths, on the Oneness of God and on the Brotherhood of Man, and is entirely free of any encumbrances of theological dogma. Above everything else, it is a positive faith. Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) was once asked "What is Islam?" to which he replied: "Obedience to God's commandments and Kindness to His creatures." On another occasion he was asked "What is a Muslim?" and he replied "A Muslim is that man from whose tongue and hand people are safe" and on yet another occasion he said "The test of man's religion lies in his dealings with others." In the *Qur'an* we read:

"And who is better than he who calls people to God and

^[1] *The Islamic Review*, 1934, Vol.22, No.3, page 61.

^[2] *The Islamic Review*, 1933, Vol. 21, No. 8, page 27.

does good... Let your weapon of defence be kindness, and, lo and behold, he that had been your enemy becomes your bosom friend... Surely God enjoins the maintaining of justice and the doing of good to others... God deeds abide for ever and are the most acceptable to God, and the most worthy of His reward."

Everywhere in the *Qur'an* to believe is to do good. To believe and not do good cannot exist in Islam.^[1]

On the 14th December, 1933, The Muslim Society of Great Britain, held a Reception in honour of the memory of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) at the Carlton Hotel, London. It is to be noted that the Lady was the 'hostess' of this sacred function. It is also notable that in the assembly Indians, Afghans, Egyptians, Syrians, Hindus and Englishmen — both Muslims and non-Muslims, Persian and Arabs were present, and Hafiz Shaikh Wahba, Arabian Minister, Presided over the function. His Excellency Shaikh Hafiz Wahba was Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of His Majesty King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.

In the course of her speech, Lady Evelyn Cobbold, dealt with the moral aspect of the life of the Holy Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). She pointed out how the Holy Prophet had to suffer in the service of 'truth' and also how finally the cause of the Holy Prophet prospered. She followed up her lecture with lantern slides showing the Cave of Hira, the Mosque of the Prophet, the Mosque of *Qiblatain*, the Tomb of the Prophet, Jabal Uhud and various other views of Makkah and Medianh connected with the life story of the Holy Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!). This novel step went a long way to help Muslims, steeped in love for the Holy Places, to live for a brief space of

^[1] *The Islamic Review*, January 1935, Vol. 23, No. 1, pages 16-18.

time in the days of the Holy Prophet. As to non-Muslims, it went a long way to impress indelibly the brilliant speech which Lady Evelyn had already made.^[1]

The following is the full text of her speech:

The Moral Aspect of the Life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad

A speech delivered at a reception held in honor of the memory of the Holy Prophet:

Ladies and Gentlemen and you especially, my brothers and sisters in Islam! I welcome you here tonight when we are gathered to honor the memory of the Great Arabian Prophet and celebrate the anniversary of his birth. You have heard that I was privileged a few months ago to visit the Sacred Places of Islam and do the pilgrimage to Makkah, the city where Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) was born and where he lived the first 40 years of his life, esteemed and honored by his fellow citizens who gave him the title of *Al-Amin*, because he was known never to break his promise, or do a mean action, or tell a lie, or let down a friend. He always had a smile for the little children he loved, and a helping hand for those in need. Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) felt deeply the degradation of his people who were sunk in idolatry and superstition, offering human sacrifices, burying their unwanted female babies alive, and doing other unnameable atrocities. In those days Muhammad was wont to retire to a lonely cave situated in the barren hills that surround Makkah, and in this cave he spent long hours and days and even weeks, in prayer and contemplation, and it was in this cave — the Cave of Hira — that he first realized that he was divinely inspired and that he had a message for humanity.

^[1] *The Islamic Review*, March 1934, Vol.22, No.3, page 72.

It must have been hard to his sensitive mind, to leave his quiet, well-ordered life and plunge into the strife and bitter recrimination that he felt would ensue, when he called on the tribes to forsake their idols and worship God alone. He knew that his own relations, the Quraish, would be among his worst enemies, as they had been for over 700 years hereditary guardians of the idols in the Kaaba and had a vested interest in the old worship. At first the Holy Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) opened his soul only to his wife, Khadijah, who became his first convert and to a few of his intimate friends, but on receiving a further Divine Command to preach the Truth to all men, Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!), overcoming his diffidence, called on his fellow citizens to assemble on the hill of Safa, where he addressed them in the following words (I propose to read to you because, though they have lost somewhat their beauty and force through the translation from the original Arabic, I think you will still find them beautiful): "Oh ye children of the Mighty One! Do you take me to be true or false? If ye consider me to be true, will you hearken to what I say? The caravan of our life will one day surely depart hence. Beware ye of the time when death shall attack. All in their turn will leave you, whether it be your relation or belongings. If there be any bliss remaining with you, it is the good which ye have done in your life. God alone is worthy of praise. His name is worthy of repetition. His thought is worthy of contemplation; His command is worthy of obedience and His Majesty is worthy of service. When ye think, think only of Him; when ye bow, bow only before Him; trust Him alone, fear Him alone, and serve Him alone. No one lives outside of Him, none can be compared with Him. The wise and the foolish are both speechless before Him. The sun and the moon are motionless in His Presence. Mighty Kings are submissive before His Exalted Majesty. The righteous and the pious are absorbed in His Presence. Neither

the hermit nor the orthodox has any power in His Kingdom. Neither the ascetic nor the mystic has a voice in His Court. Therefore count not on a mediator between you and your God."

The storm of anger that followed this public announcement forced the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) to discontinue, and he was shouted at and called a madman. Cruel abuse and satire was hurled at him when he showed himself in the streets of the city. But inspired by the knowledge of his Divine Message he continued to preach from the street corners, the market place, and the hills and he gained many converts. When he found he could not protect his disciples, most of whom suffered martyrdom, he advised them to emigrate with their families to Abyssinia and Madinah, while he himself remained on at his post. But after a time, finding his life was in danger, he migrated with one faithful friend Abu Baker to Madinah, where he received a warm welcome from the Muslims already gathered there. But there was no peace for Muhammad in Madinah: it was an endless *Jihad*, striving of good against evil, until after ten long years the good prevailed. Idolatry was overcome and the Arabs of the great peninsula embraced Islam. The Prophet returned to his native city, Makkah, in triumph. He was virtually king of Arabia, with the rulers of neighboring Kingdoms seeking his friendship. But he refused the pomp and pageantry of kingship and returned to his little house in Madinah, where, when not immersed in affairs of State, he continued to live his former simple life subsisting generally on dates and camel's milk.

But the long years of hardship had been very tough for the Prophet — thirteen years of cruel persecution in Makkah, followed by 10 years of ceaseless *Jihad* in Madinah. And now feeling his end near, he called on his disciples to carry on his work, urging tolerance: "Let there be no compulsion in religion," (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2: 256) and enjoining on them

the necessity of acquiring knowledge for "the ink of the scholar is more precious than the martyr's." "Acquire knowledge — it enableth its possessor to distinguish right from wrong, it lighteth the path to heaven, it is our friend in the desert, our society in our solitude, our comrade when friendless, it guidedth to happiness, it sustaineth in adversity, it is an ornament among friends and an armor against enemies."

The mission of the Prophet was accomplished and his intrepid spirit took flight to the blessed companionship of God above, and thus ended a life devoted to God and humanity. His disciples fired by his example carried the Faith of Islam not only through Asia but to Egypt, through Northern Africa, Spain and Europe, establishing universities, mosques, hospitals and schools of learning in the cities, holding the flame of their Faith and the torch of civilization of a darkened Europe sunk in ignorance and superstition.

Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon!) was the greatest Prophet and the greatest legislator the world has ever seen, and for us Muslims to whom has descended the heritage of his example and the glorious Qur'an, it is for us to try and follow in his footsteps and live the life he would have us live, holding to our Faith and who knows that one day Islam may help to heal the wounds of humanity.⁽¹⁾

It is, I think, not out of place to state that after becoming a Muslim and performing pilgrimage, Lady Evelyn Zainab Cobbold worked as a *Da'ee* in the real sense of the word. A large number of non-Muslims entered the fold of Islam not only by her company but also by studying the book *Pilgrimage to Mecca*.

It is also worth mentioning that *Pilgrimage to Mecca* has a 'Foreword' written by His Excellency Shaikh Wahba, Saudi Arabian Minister in London and is well illustrated.

⁽¹⁾ *The Islamic Review*, March 1934, Vol. 22, No. 3, pages 69-78.

After the book *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, was published, reviews from different quarters welcoming the book and highlighting the services rendered by Lady Evelyn Zainab Cobbold appeared in newspapers and journals. It will not be out of place to mention their names. They are: *Cornhill Magazine*, *The Sunday Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *John O'London's Weekly*, *The Times*, *The Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, *Country Life*, *Islamic Culture Review*, *The Islamic Review*, *The Muslim World*, etc.

While commenting on *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, Prof. Marcia Hermansen, says:

"Lady Evelyn Cobbold is the only female among this early group of European pilgrims. She performed the *Hajj* in 1933, and while in Saudi Arabia was a guest of the Philbys. There she met Prince Faisal but not the King. Her *Hajj* account is written in the form of a diary which presents a brief history of the life of the Prophet of Islam. "The more I read and the more I studied, the more convinced I became that Islam was the most practical religion".^[1]

It remains for me to say a few words about the place of the pilgrimage in Islam. Every Muslim, male or female, is required to make the pilgrimage to Makkah at least once. Five conditions are, however, necessary in order to make this injunction obligatory:-

- (1) Ripeness of intelligence and discernment in the pilgrim.
- (2) Perfect freedom and liberty.
- (3) Possession of the means of transport and subsistence during the journey.
- (4) Possession of means sufficient to support the pilgrim's family during his absence.

^[1] *The Muslim World*, January, Vol. Lxxxix, No. 1, pages 59-60.

- (5) The possibility and practicability of the journey.

The influence of the *Hajj* cannot be exaggerated. To be a member of that huge congregation gathered together from the four corners of the earth on this sacred occasion and on this sacred spot, and to join with them in all humility in the glorification of God, is to have one's consciousness impressed by the full significance of the Islamic Ideal, is to be privileged to participate in one of the most soul-inspiring experiences that have ever been granted to human beings. To visit the birthplace of Islam, to tread the sacred ground hallowed by the memories of Muhammad's long toil and sufferings in his struggle to call erring humanity back to God, is to re-live those glorious years of sacrifice and martyrdom, is to have one's soul kindled by that celestial fire which lighted up the whole earth. But this is not all. The *Hajj* above everything else makes for unity among Muslims. If there is anything that unifies the scattered forces of Islam and imbues them with mutual sympathy, it is the pilgrimage. It provides them with a central point to which they rally from all corners of the earth. It creates for them annually an occasion to meet, and know one another, to exchange views and compare experiences and unite their various efforts to the common good. Distances are annihilated. Differences of sect are set aside. Divergences of race and color cease to exist in this fraternity of faith that unites all Muslims in one great brotherhood and makes them conscious of the glorious heritage that is theirs. Then, when the religious duties are over, merchants from all lands discuss trade and commerce and transact business with each other, theologians and jurists discuss questions of religion and jurisprudence, scientists the latest advances in science, men of letters literature, financiers problems of finance, politicians and statesmen questions of national and international politics. The institution of *Hajj* does not represent to the Muslims merely a sacred institution but also a League of Nations, an International Academy of Art and Science, and an International Chamber of

Commerce all in one. Professor Snouk Hurgronje says: "The ideal of a league of human races has indeed been approached by Islam more nearly than by any other; for the League of Nations founded on the basis of Muhammad's religion takes the principle of the equality of all human races so seriously as to put other communities to shame." Sir Thomas Arnold says: "But above all Islam ordains a yearly gathering of believers of all nations and languages, brought together from all parts of the world to pray in that sacred place (The Kaaba) towards which their faces are set in every hour of private worship in their distant homes. No fetch of religious genius could have conceived a better expedient for impressing on the minds of the faithful a sense of their common life and their common brotherhood in the bond of faith. Here is a supreme act of common worship, the African, of the West Coast of Africa meets the Chinaman from the distant East; the courtly and polished Ottoman recognizes his brother Muslim in the wild islander from the farthest end of the Malayan Sea. At the same time, throughout the whole Muslim world the hearts of believers are lifted up in sympathy with their more fortunate brethren gathered together in the sacred city (Makkah) as in their own homes they celebrate the festival of 'Id-al-Adha or (as it is called in Turkey) 'the feast of Bayram.'"

In the following account I have spoken of the ceremonial rites performed during the pilgrimage. These are merely commemorative acts designed to remind us of the trials of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, so that we may be brought to realise more keenly the infinite mercy and the all-transforming grace of God. They must not be taken to mean that ceremonialism or ritualism plays any part in Islam. As some one has said, these acts are in the nature of a historical pageant to commemorate the birth of the Arab nation. How small a part ceremonialism or mere form plays in Islam, is illustrated by the following Verse from the Qur'an:

"It is not righteousness to turn in prayer towards the east

or the west, but he is righteous who believes in God, the Last Day, the Angels, the Books and the Prophets, and gives of his wealth, in spite of his love for it, to the near of kin, the orphan, the needy, the wayfarer and the beggar, and for the manumission of slaves, and prays and pays the poordue, and keeps his promise when he gives one, and is patient in adversity, affliction, and in times of conflict."

[We have reproduced verbatim the Introduction to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's book *Pilgrimage to Mecca*. We reviewed it in our October, 1934, issue. We then said that Lady Evelyn Cobbold throughout her book fought fearlessly for Islam and ably refuted the misconceptions rampant in Europe about it, and that from our own viewpoint, it was here that the real value of the book lay.

It is interesting to study the reactions of the English (Christian) Press towards that portion of the book. For as a travel book they all agree that it is a most fascinating and charming work. It is in connection with the religious matter in it that opinions are sharply divided for while some, like the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* (to mention only two) hail it as a welcome relief from the usual tornado of ignorant and bigoted anti-Islamic literature produced in England, and even wish that Lady Evelyn had devoted more space to the exposition of Islam, others wish she had not written about religious matters at all, and point to this as the only fault in an otherwise admirable book.

That such an irrefutable defence of Islam should prove distasteful to those who find pleasure in reading the usual calumnies about it is not surprising, but to the credit of the great English nation let it be said that these are happily very much in the minority, and to the credit of the able author let it also be said that even these were forced to admit that the book is accurate, reliable, straight-forward, honest and sincere. A

greater tribute from an avowed adversary can hardly be imagined, but perhaps the best tribute of all is that paid to the book by the *Methodist Magazine* which makes it *The Book of the Month* and devotes no less than three pages to the summary of the main events in it. The book has been called unique, memorable, vital, valuable, etc., etc., and we assert that such praise from non-Muslims is not unmerited. Its publication has, moreover, supplied a new practical illustration to the following statement about the *Hajj* by S.H. Leader in his *Veiled Mysteries of Egypt*:-

The importance of the pilgrimage as a great bond of spiritual inspiration has scarcely been realized by most writers. There are from 60,000 to 90,000 pilgrims to Mecca every year. Its influence over the lives of those who perform it is often so great that it gives a new direction to character; in every generation men and women have been roused from spiritual lethargy to become missionaries and leaders of Islam in all parts of the world by the experiences they have undergone in their Holy Land.

Lady Evelyn by publishing the account of her pilgrimage to Makkah has become the greatest missionary of Islam in England. Her book is finding its way not only into Society, where Lady Evelyn is a prominent member, but also to the general public, and is proving to be a revelation to all those who read it. Many enquiries about Islam are being addressed to Lady Evelyn, and a few people have already embraced Islam through first reading her book and then meeting her.^[1]

We feel sure our readers will agree that it is a book they should all read and present to their non-Muslim friends who are interested in Islam as we cannot think of a better introduction to Islam which is at the same time the fascinating story of a

^[1] *The Islamic Review*, Vol-23, No. 1 pages 19-23.

most interesting journey very charmingly told.- *Ed. R. I.*

Here are a few quotations from the various reviews:-

Unique in the real sense of that so often misapplied word. The author has a graphic pen for description, a humorous turn of mind, which is invaluable for adding individuality to delineation and a fresh and original point of view. — *Cornhill Magazine*.



The Pilgrimage to Mecca has often been written about, but never before from the point of view of a Western woman convert to Islam. Lady Evelyn has a fresh and original point of view which clarifies many things in the Moslim religion to Western minds. — *The Sunday Times*.



As a record of individual religious experiences, influenced by an intimate knowledge of two great religions, Lady Evelyn Cobbold's book has a rare appeal of its own. If she may be thought to be a little prejudiced in favor of her adopted faith, we have been accustomed to hear in its disfavor so much which is based upon pure ignorance and antipathy that a little overpraise, if such it be, comes as a welcome relief. — *Manchester Guardian*.

Lady Evelyn's account of the pilgrimage itself is sufficient to make the book memorable, but even more interesting are the pages which deal with Arab life and customs of the present day. — *John O'London's Weekly*.



Her book is straightforward and honest, and its value is much enhanced by a number of unusual photographs of Makkah and Madinah. — *The Times*.



An artless record, very readable, very sincere, and very reliable. Patently this book is written primarily for the English-speaking readers who may have entertained erroneous ideas about the Islamic faith. By means of numerous quotations from the Qur'an and from writers sympathetic with Islam, Lady Evelyn Cobbold emphasizes the many admirable qualities of her faith.

It will doubtless be of much benefit to that large section of the West which yet thinks of Islam as something irrevocably opposed to Christianity. Its effects must be to promote not antagonism, but a better understanding between the two Semitic faiths which succeeded the Jewish religion. — Mr. Kenneth Williams in *The Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*.



To her Islam is the religion of common sense, and it is that engaging quality that is the medium in which she presents her impressions of Makkah and Madinah. To the historical significance of the holy places she brings knowledge and faith. One is left with as profound a respect for her determination as for her religion. — *Country Life*

[*The Islamic Review*, Vol.23, No.1 pages 19-23.]

An English Lady's Pilgrimage

There are certain false ideas about Islam which still prevail in Europe: that Muslims believe that women have no souls, that Islam, as a religion, may appeal to men (because it allows polygamy) but cannot possibly appeal to any civilized enlightened woman, and so forth. These misapprehensions the delightful account which Lady Evelyn Cobbold has given of her pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Makkah and her performance of the *Hajj* ought completely to dispel; for there can be no doubt either of Lady Evelyn's sincerity as a *Muslimah* or of the freedom of her choice of Al-Islam as her religion; and the story of her pilgrimage is sufficient refutation of the

ancient calumny concerning souls. Concerning her belief, she tells us in her Introduction:

"I am often asked when and why I became a Muslim. I can only reply that I do not know the precise moment when the truth of Islam dawned on me. It seems that I have always been a Muslim... As a child I spent the winter in a Moorish villa on a hill outside Algiers, where my parents went in search of sunshine. There I learnt to speak Arabic and my delight was to escape my governess and visit the mosques with my Algerian friends, and unconsciously I was a little Muslim at heart. After three years' wintering at Mustapha Superieure we left the villa for good, much to my despair but in time I forgot my Arab friends, my prayers in the mosque and even the Arabic language. Some years went by and I happened to be in Rome staying with some Italian friends, when my host asked me if I would like to visit the Pope. Of course I was thrilled, and, clad all in black with a long veil, I was admitted into the august presence in company with my host and his sister. When His Holiness suddenly addressed me, asking if I was a Catholic, I was taken aback for a moment and then replied that I was a Muslim. What possessed me I don't pretend to know, as I had not given a thought to Islam for many years. A match was lit and I then and there determined to read up and study the Faith. The more I read and the more I studied, the more convinced I became that Islam was the most practical religion, and the one most calculated to solve the world's many perplexing problems, and to bring to humanity peace and happiness. Since then I have never wavered in my belief that there is but one God; that Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and others were Prophets, divinely inspired, that to every nation God has sent an apostle, that we are not born in sin, and that we do not need any redemption, that we do not need anyone to intercede between us and God, whom we can approach at all times, and that no one can intercede for us, not even

Muhammad or Jesus, and that our salvation depends entirely on ourselves and our actions."

Lady Evelyn Cobbold went to Jeddah in the hope of being allowed to perform the pilgrimage, for the Saudi Arabian Minister in London had written to his Government on her behalf; but it was not till she had been the guest of Mr. and Mrs. St. John Philby for some days that the desired permission reached her. At once she started for Al-Madinah. "We started for Madinah after the Dawn Prayer. I had hired a car for the twenty days of pilgrimage, with an Arab driver who knew the road and was accompanied by Mustapha Nazir, a very urbane personage lent me by Mr. Philby who combined the duties of equerry and courier, and proved invaluable. Also a nice old Sudanese, father of the cook, who had come from Dongola to do the pilgrimage and wanted to kiss my feet when I offered him a lift to Medinah."

The only adventure on the road was the fording of an unexpected and uncharted river. "We halted once again when two policemen stopped us with flashlights, and after the Arab greeting of peace warned us that it had rained for three days and the road was under water. We thanked them and proceeded by another sandy track which also led us to water. Our driver got out and waded in it to his knees, but returned to say that the bottom was hard and he thought the Ford could do it. The little car did not fail us, and after another hour we saw lights in the distance. They were the lights of Madinah-al-Mannoura, the Illumined City."

It was long past the hour when the city-gates are closed but the Amir of Al-Madinah had given orders for her to be admitted whenever she arrived.

Lady Evelyn thoroughly enjoyed her stay at Al-Madinah where, besides her daily visits to the Prophet's Mosque, she went out to Mt. Uhud, spent some peaceful hours among the gardens

and made many friends. More than once she mentions the destruction of the tombs, regretting here and at Makkah that she could not see the cemeteries in their former grandeur.

"I was shown the graves of the nine wives of the Prophet, pathetic little mounds once enclosed in white domed buildings which were ruthlessly destroyed a few years ago by the *Wahhabi* soldiery; the tombs of Fatima and her son Hassan are close by, and many other heroes of Islam of long ago. All the tombs are demolished, only a few stones mark their last resting-place."

But she has previously reminded herself and us that it was the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) himself who ordered that graves should be level with the ground.

"We drink tea and again discuss the destruction of the Tombs which is evidently a sore subject and there is a feeling of resentment always against the *Ikhwan*, but when the King is mentioned there is expressed noting but admiration and gratitude for the security and order he had given the country. One Shaikh even went so far as to say that he considered Ibn Sa'ud to be the greatest ruler Islam has seen since the days of the first four Caliphs. That is indeed praise!"

She left Al-Madinah on a Friday, and attended *Jum'ah* prayers at the Prophet's Mosque before starting on her return journey to Jeddah.

"The great Mosque is crowded with worshippers from every Islamic country — Emirs from Bokhara and Nigeria, Indian Princes, bearded Russians, Pashas from Egypt and Turkey stand shoulder to shoulder with poor pilgrims who have saved to spend their life's savings to reach this goal.

"The women around eye me with curiosity, they ply me with questions — asking me what country I come from, where is my family — am I alone. When I reply that I come from the far

north they conclude that it is Turkey: their minds cannot visualize a land farther north than that. Two young Turkish women come and talk with me, but I cannot understand them. At length a lady arrives who grasps my meaning when I mention my home is in London: she is a Syrian, whose husband has travelled to England and she welcomes me as a Muslim from that far land, kissing the palms of my hands to show her appreciation."

After two more nights in the Philby's hospitable house at Jiddah our author started for Makkah 'at nine (Arab time)' — that is, after the 'Asr — and her description of the first sight of *Jabal Nur* and of the Holy City, and the excitement of the crowd of pilgrims on the road is memorable. A comfortable lodging has again been found for her, and she is warmly welcomed by its owners, a large household.

"They bring me green caravan tea flavored with mint, and having a faint aroma of ambergris, which I find delicious, and we arrange that I visit the Mosque and perform my *Umrāh* or small pilgrimage later in the evening, hoping that some of the crowd will have dispersed. Till this is done I may not remove any of my pilgrim clothes except the veil and gloves. Presently dinner is brought in on a tray and placed on the floor before us and my hostess shares my meal. When our hands are washed, she disappears to her own apartments to smoke her narghileh while I try and rest as I have a very strenuous night before me. The mosquitoes buzz round and I take refuge under my net, but one of the enemy has entered and, as I may not kill it, I unpack a tube of Flit that I was given on leaving Jeddah, a priceless gift. I smear myself with it, and if the mosquitos choose to commit suicide I feel no responsibility."

Late that evening she performed the *Umrāh* and she has given us a vivid description of the Haram Sharif in the gloom when scarcely half of the lamps were lighted "but the mosque was

light enough for me to see the Kaaba in the centre of the quadrangle" at the time when she entered it with her *Mutawwif*. It was after midnight when she returned to her lodging. There follows an excellent, because sympathetic, description of the occupations of the ladies in a Makkah household of the upper class, and of various excursions. And then comes the description of the actual pilgrimage, of the scenes at Arafat and Mina, beginning with: "everyone seems happy and excited this morning. All the little ladies of the Haram come to congratulate me on the pilgrimage before us. They are dressed in their clean white clothes, and the smiling slaves brought me a double allowance of hot water. As we are not starting till this afternoon I refuse to put on my *Hajj* garments till the last minute, knowing I am to make a linger acquaintance with them than I shall appreciate."

The only approach to rudeness that the author met with was when she was reading a book in her car as it stood in the long queue of camels, donkeys, motor-cars and pedestrians trying to emerge from Makkah.

"...a voice from a neighboring car asked, 'Is that an Arabic book?' Suleiman answered quickly that of course it was an Arabic, and whispered to me to close the book, which I refused to do. Again the voice spoke: 'Can you swear by all we hold holy, it is Arabic and a book for the Muslims?' Before the alarmed Suleiman could answer I turned and held the book out to the anxious enquirer saying, 'This is an English book and I am an English Muslim and I am here on pilgrimage by permission of the King.' After a few seconds of astonished silence he returned the book to me, saying *Alhamdulillah!*"

Lady Evelyn has given an impressive picture of that unique annual gathering to perform certain rites which, as she has justly said in her Introduction, is for the Muslim "not merely a sacred institution but also a League of Nations, an International Academy

of Art and Science, and an International Chamber of Commerce all in one." She has also, incidentally, given a clear general idea of Islam and Muslim history; but it is the little intimate remarks in her diary which give the book such lively human interest, revealing as they do a truly Muslim spirit of goodwill toward every nation of the earth and every class of person. If any individual stands forth in the course of her narrative, it is the King of Najd and the Hijaz, whom she never actually met, but whose personality impressed her, as it has impressed others; as perhaps the only great Islamic figure of this age.

When after a few days of quarantine at Port Sudan, Lady Evelyn went on board a Bibby liner bound for England, we find the following among the last few entries in her pilgrim diary: "I share my meals at a table with five charming ladies, who have all come from Ceylon, and I wonder if it is tea or rubber that interests them, till I discover they are missionaries. Has the chief steward a sense of humor that he places the one pilgrim at this particular table?" And one of these Christian Missionaries volunteered to type the diary of the Muslim Pilgrim.^[1]

The only mistake we have noticed apart from a few evident misprints in on p.156, where, in a translation of a well-known Verse of the Qur'an (*Surat Muhammad*, 47:15) 'ewers' occurs four times instead of 'rivers.' The book is illustrated with good photographs and provided with a map and index.^[2]

To our readers Lady Evelyn Cobbold is not unknown. She is a great traveller and has a keen observant mind. Last year she went to Makkah to perform the pious and meritorious duty of pilgrimage incumbent upon every well-to-do Muslim man and

^[1] *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, by Lady Evelyn Cobbold. Price sh. 10/6. pp. 19, 260: 5/1/2x7 3/4 (Murray, London).

^[2] The above mentioned *Review* was written by Allama Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall who was chief-Editor of *Islamic Culture*. April 1936. Vol. 10, No. 2, pages 324-328.

woman. It is her impressions of this journey that she has now given us in her recent book under review. Besides being an interesting travel book, the book has a unique feature of its own which one does not find in books written by her forerunners on Makkah and the pilgrimage. She writes as a devout Muslim ought to. Not only this, she more often than not quite fearlessly throughout her book fights for Islam and its teachings. Some of the old misconceptions about Islam rampant in Europe have been ably refuted and from our viewpoint it is in this that the real value of this book lies.

In her Introduction she describes her little encounter while a child with the Pope, who asked her if she was a Catholic. His Holiness must have been shocked to hear the reply she made: "I am a Muslim," she said. One is reminded of the well-known saying of the holy Prophet: "Every child is born in the religion of Islam. It is the parents of the child who make him a Magian, Jew or Christian." She lays stress on the fact, whose importance cannot well be over-emphasized that Islam is a religion of practice. "Everywhere in the Qur'an to believe is to do good. To believe and not do good cannot exist in Islam." The book deals with the life of Arabia, especially that of Makkah and Madinah, during the days of pilgrimage in a manner that is at once fascinating and intimate.

We strongly recommend this book to all those who are anxious not only to have a glimpse of the convert to Islam, but also a memorable portrayal of the customs and ways of life in Arabia under King Ibn Saud.

Pilgrimage to Mecca has a foreword by His Excellency Shaikh Wahba Saudi Arabian Minister in London, and is well illustrated.^[1]

The following review on *Pilgrimage to Mecca* was written by a most famous Orientalist Dr. Rev. Samuel Marinus Zwemer,

^[1] *The Islamic Review*, Vol. 22, No. 10, October 1934, page 376.

who founded the 'Muslim World' in 1911.

He held the degrees of D.D., LL.D. and Litt.D., He was born in 1867 and died on 2nd April, 1952. He wrote a number of books on Comparative Religions. *Arabia: the Cradle of Islam*, 1902, *Muslim Doctrine, Of God*, 1906, *Islam: a Challenge to Faith*. *The Muslim World* are his famous writings.^[1]

The city of Makkah lies in a valley imprisoned by stony hills, and is the last word in desolation. The only reason for its existence is the Pilgrimage. In the foreword to this extraordinary volume the Arabian Minister in London says that Lady Cobbold is the first Muslim English woman to perform the pilgrimage. This is not strictly speaking correct. We learn from a review of the book in *The Geographical Journal* that: "Lady Cobbold is not the first English woman to visit Makkah. In the winter of 1877-78 John Fryer Keane was in the Holy City, and while there was introduced to a lady called Zaynab. Her English name was Macintosh, and she had been taken prisoner by the rebels at Lucknow twenty years before. She was forcibly married to one of her captors, who subsequently sought refuge in Makkah from the avenging hand of the Indian Government, taking her with him. The poor woman was making her slender living by embroidering skull-caps when Keane met her, for her captor had been dead some years. She was about forty years of age, having been captured as a girl of twenty. There has been at least one other European woman at Makkah: the wife of a German convert who died there five or six years ago."

We read in the introduction that Lady Cobbold had early contact with Islam.

"As a child I spent the winter months in a Moorish villa on a hill outside Algiers, where my parents went in search of

^[1] *Who was who*, 1951-1960, Vol. V, London, Adam, Charles Black, 1967, page 1206

sunshine. There I learned to speak Arabic, and my delight was to escape my governess and visit the mosques with my Algerian friends, and unconsciously I was a little Muslim at heart. After three years' wintering at Mustapha Superieure, we left the villa for good much to my despair, but in time I forgot my Arab friends, my prayers in the mosque and even the Arabic language."

Afterward she read and studied, and one can not doubt the sincerity of her apostasy from the Catholic faith. After a visit to the Pope she writes:

"Since then I have never wavered in my belief that there is but one God; that Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and others were Prophets, divinely inspired, that to every nation God has sent an Apostle, that we are not born in sin, and that we do not need any redemption, that we do not need anyone to intercede between us and God, Whom we can approach at all times, and that no one can intercede for us, not even Muhammad or Jesus, and that our salvation depends entirely on ourselves and our actions."

On her pilgrimage she enjoyed every facility, including personal friendship with Mr. St. John Philby, at whose home in Jeddah she was welcomed. She describes graphically what she saw and heard in that tow sacred cities during this brief visit, arriving at Jeddah on February 22 and leaving Makkah on April 9.

One is astonished, however, at her easy-going attitude toward slavery in Arabia and the condition of womanhood in Makkah. She pictures the slaves as perfectly happy, and states that slavery and the slave trade are forbidden by the Qur'an. Yet in the same chapter we learn that the lovely garden of Mr. Philby "is well tended by two female slaves, one of them given him by the king, who owns some hundreds, and on great occasions such as a marriage or birth in the royal family he manumits a few according to the precept of the Qur'an, which does not encourage slavery."

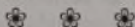
In spite of all evidence to the contrary, in spite of the ignorance, superstition, and degradation of womanhood in Arabia and especially in Makkah, by the witness of all travelers, she writes:

"It was Islam that removed that bondage in which women were held from the very dawn of human history, and give them a social standing and legal rights, such as were not granted them in England till many centuries later."

The book is an interesting apologetic for present day Islam in Arabia. But the author's mind was warped from the outset. In the concluding chapter she writes:

"I have brought two books with me on pilgrimage, an Arabic Qura'n and *Arabia Deserta*, to which I have already referred. I open the latter and try to fix my attention on the quaint Elizabethan style, which to my mind is the charm of the book, but doughty was too sturdy a Christian, or perhaps too bigoted, to perceive any truth in Islam, and the whole of his writing breathes such an animosity that I shut the volume, feeling it sacrilege to read it in my present surroundings. I setting myself at the shuttered window, where through the pierced carving I can look down into the empty street for a sign of Mustapha, and opening my Qura'n at random I am soon immersed in the beautiful *Surat 'Light*.'"^[1]

Lady Zeinab (Evelyn) Cobbold



^[1] *The Muslim World*, January 1935. Vol. 25. No. 1, pages 91-92.

قِصَصُ نِسْوَةٍ دَخَلْنَ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ

باللغة الإنجليزية

Why Women are accepting Islam

is a compilation of the numerous narratives about the lives, experiences and previous beliefs as well as Islamic impressions and reasons of different lucky women, belonging to all walks of life, as to why they reverted to Islam. Darussalam has already published one book from the same compiler on the same focus that was very much appreciated by the readers. We hope this study will help those non-Muslim women whose concepts are not clear about Islam, and those people who are working in Da'wah field.